W. H. SMITH & SON'S

SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARY,

SOLD

186, STRAND, LONDON,

AND AT THE RAILWAY BOOKSTALLS.

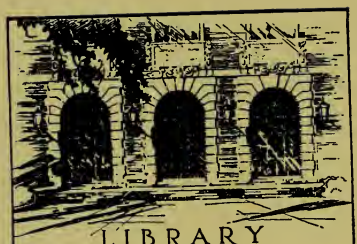
The person charging this material is responsible for its return to the library from which it was withdrawn on or before the **Latest Date** stamped below.

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University.

To renew call Telephone Center, 333-8400

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

L161—O-1096



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
H28t
v.3

THE

TALLANTS OF BARTON.

THE

TALLANTS OF BARTON.

A Tale of Fortune and Finance.

BY

JOSEPH HATTON,

AUTHOR OF "BITTER SWEETS: A LOVE STORY;" "AGAINST THE STREAM," ETC., ETC.

"The wheel of Fortune turns incessantly round, and who can say within himself I shall to-day be uppermost?"—*Confucius.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.
1867.

[*The Right of Translation is reserved.*]

LONDON:
BRADBURY, EVANS, AND CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

823
H28t
v. 3

CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	WEDDING BELLS	1
II.	"YET OFT O'ER CREDULOUS YOUTH SUCH SIRENS TRIUMPH, AND LEAD THEIR CAPTIVE SENSE IN CHAINS AS STRONG AS ADAMANT."	17
III.	COMING HOME	35
IV.	TRAVELLERS BY LAND AND SEA	49
V.	LORD AND LADY VERNER	60
VI.	IN WHICH DAME FORTUNE PLAYS OFF HER GRIM JOKE UPON LIONEL HAMMERTON	74
VII.	CONTAINS A LETTER FROM A DEAR FRIEND, AND TAKES THE READER ONCE MORE TO SEVERNTOWN	88
VIII.	PORTENDS A DEED OF VENGEANCE	101
IX.	GLANCES AT WILLIAMSON'S STORY, AND TERMINATES PAUL SOMERTON'S ADVENTURE	112
X.	"FROM GRAVE TO GAY"	119

PAGE

XI.—EXPLANATIONS THAT CAME TOO LATE . . 128

XII.—"WHAT THE MOON SAW" 144

XIII.—IN WHICH THE SEVERNSHIRE CORONER HOLDS AN INQUEST 157

XIV.—THE CHIEF OF THE BRAZENCROOK POLICE MAKES A BOLD STROKE FOR THE GOVERNMENT REWARD 175

XV.—CONTAINS A CURIOUS ILLUSTRATION OF DETECTIVE PHILOSOPHY, AND IS AN IMPORTANT LINK IN THIS HISTORY 184

XVI.—"BAL. TO R. T., £300" 198

XVII.—IN THE FIRELIGHT 209

XVIII.—THE BEGINNING OF THE END 221

XIX.—IN WHICH SEVERAL PERSONS QUIT THE STAGE FOR EVER 245

XX.—CLOSING SCENES 262

THE

TALLANTS OF BARTON.

CHAPTER I.

WEDDING BELLS.

As the sail which we first discern, like a speck against the sky, comes into port at last, so the wedding-day of Miss Amy Tallant arrived in due course of time; and in order that we may present the event to our readers in the most familiar manner, we have compiled from the newspapers the following account of it, discarding on the one hand the rhapsodies of a Severntown reporter who introduced the whole of the marriage service into his version of the ceremony, and omitting on the other hand certain Swivellerish flights of fancy in which the redoubtable Mr. Jenkins himself

indulged after he had dined with Richard Tallant, Esq., at his "palatial residence" in Kensington Palace Gardens.

The marriage took place at St. George's, Hanover Square. The bride was accompanied to church by her brother, Mr. Richard Tallant, her aunt, Lady Amelia Petherington, Miss Somerton, and Lady Georgina Evelyn. The Earl of Verner, accompanied by his "best man" Lord Tufton, went to the church from the Gordon Hotel, Pall Mall East; and the bride from her brother's princely residence, Kensington Palace Gardens. The bridesmaids were Lady Georgina Evelyn, Lady Maria Fotherington, Miss Fredrika Lionel, Miss Alicia Lionel, Lady de Witz, and Miss Somerton. The bridegroom was first at the church, speedily followed by the bridesmaids, who came from their respective residences. The bride arrived at eleven o'clock, and was conducted to the altar by her brother, a voluntary on the organ being played meanwhile.

Long before this, a distinguished party of friends

and spectators had taken their places in the church, and amongst them we noticed Lady Duval, the Countess of Wharton, Major Darfield and Mrs. Darfield, the Hon. J. Delafield and Mrs. Delafield, the Hon. Mrs. Dawkins, Miss Elizabeth Dawkins, Miss Amelia Dawkins, and Miss Felicia Henrietta Dawkins, the Misses Constantine, and the Marquis of Questfield, Sir John and Lady Bewdley, Lady Elizabeth Himley, the Hon. Captain Evesham, Mrs. Evesham, and Miss Evesham, Lady Worcester, the Marquis of Forth, Mr. De Lawtworth and the Countess Dawnforth, His Excellency the French Ambassador, His Excellency the Prince Calignousky, accompanied by the Baron Dionsky and General Dronkoni, Mr. Dest, Lieut. Somerton, Captain MacSchauser, &c., &c.

The bridesmaids awaited the arrival of the bride in the central aisle, and their appearance was as charming as the loveliest bride could desire. Their dresses were of white grenadine trimmed with cerise satin and sashes of the same colour. The wreaths were of lilies of the valley and violets.

The beauty of the bride was the theme of general admiration. She was said to be much like the Petherington family, of which her noble mother was reckoned the greatest beauty. Her bridal dress was of the costliest and most becoming character,—a robe of white satin with a veil of exquisite point-lace, which fell in gorgeous folds upon her heavy sweeping train. She wore a necklace of pearls and diamonds, and bracelets to match.

The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Francis Clifton, vicar of Brazencrook, assisted by the Hon. and Rev. James Fitzpatrick. The responses were given in clear and distinct tones, and the ceremony was altogether most imposing and impressive.

Amidst the magnificent strains of the "Wedding March" the bridegroom led the newly-created Countess to the vestry. The register having been signed and attested, the bridal party left the church for the Gordon Hotel, where a sumptuous *déjeûner* was prepared for the bridal party and friends. The bill of fare was quite a curiosity in the way of luxurious indications of the feast, and

the tables were adorned with the most exquisite ornaments and rare flowers. The bride-cake was designed by an artist of high repute, and was surmounted by a design of the noble Earl's magnificent castle of Montem.

Before the company retired from the dining-room, Lord Tufton rose, and in a few appropriate sentences proposed "Health and happiness to the Bride and Bridegroom." The toast was received with rapturous applause. In reply, Lord Verner said that a year ago he had not even dreamed of such a day as this; but the time would never be effaced from his memory as one of the greatest happiness he could possibly experience: it not only was a day never to be forgotten by him, and always to be remembered with gratitude and delight as that upon which his dear wife had given herself up to his keeping; but it was to be remembered also with unfeigned pleasure on account of the many friends it had brought around him, and from whose society his former bachelor habits had, to a great extent, excluded him. It was indeed the

happiest, the most important, the one red-letter day of his existence. Loud cheers greeted his lordship's earnest speech, and then the bride retired to prepare for her departure for Horton Hall, Essex, the seat of Lord Tufton, where they would spend the honeymoon. The Marquis of Questfield then proposed "the Bridesmaids," and Mr. Tallant acknowledged the deserved compliment in eloquent terms.

At three o'clock the bride and bridegroom took their departure, proceeding by special train to Corfield. The lady's travelling dress was pronounced to be in the best possible taste.

The journals then gave a list of the presents to the bride, which we need not republish; the gifts were from great people mostly, and were of the costliest character. They included necklets, with pendants of diamonds and pearls; bracelets set in brilliants, diamonds, brooches, workboxes inlaid with gold, dressing cases, Sévres vases, antique china, crosses set with diamonds, writing tablets, watches, fans, and a hundred other things of gold

and silver and precious stones, and woods and china, and leather work.

The monitors of the Press, who gave to the world this interesting account of the marriage, may almost be said to have been everywhere on that eventful day. They had been to Mr. Tallant's residence and seen all the wedding presents; they had talked with the fashionable dressmaker and milliner who had had the making of the *trousseau*. They had seen the *déjeûner* laid out in that fine room of the Gordon Hotel; but it was only the privilege of the writer of this history to follow the lady into her chamber.

How handsome she looked! Those observant newspaper gentlemen might well speak of her charms and graceful carriage. When her maid had removed the long lace veil, and the bride's hair had fallen loosely upon her shoulders, she presented a picture of *débonnaire* gracefulness and beauty. And what a contrast they were,—the Countess, and Phœbe, with the Miranda-like simplicity and sweetness!

"You may leave me now," said the bride to her maid.

"Yes, your ladyship," said the woman.

The title sounded strange and harsh somehow to the newly-made countess. It seemed to cut her off from the people whom she had known from childhood; and yet her heart beat with pride when she felt that she had reached the highest point of her ambition—that all her wild dream had come true.

"How charming you look, my pet!" she said to Phœbe.

"Reflected beauty," said Phœbe, putting her arm round the bride. "Only reflected beauty, for I never saw you look so pretty, so lovely as you look this morning."

The Countess smiled a little sadly, but this might only be a woman's tribute to the importance of the occasion.

"How kind his lordship is! how very kind," said the bride, as she discovered some new gift on the dressing table.

"It made me cry to hear him speak so earnestly and nobly to-day when your health was proposed," said Phœbe.

"You are very tender-hearted," said the Countess, "I did not see any one else look like crying; but the words touched me too. He is a truly generous, warm-hearted man, I am sure."

Phœbe looked at her friend, as much as to ask her if she had ever doubted it. The Countess read the thought in an instant.

"You think me a strange woman. I have never thought much about his feelings or his heart until lately, Phœbe, and never so much as I have done this morning. It has been all ambition and revenge until to-day, Phœbe; what is it to be in the future?"

She sat down as this thought presented itself to her, and looked at herself in the great mirrors that repeated her supple figure over and over again. She sat and looked at herself, and Phœbe, knowing her secret, crept near her and laid her head upon her shoulders.

"Duty in the future," said Phœbe softly; "your noble husband's love and generosity will make you love him in the end I am sure, as he deserves to be loved; the path of duty lies before you and cannot be mistaken."

"He has long since won my respect, Phœbe, and my gratitude; he loves me with a good man's truthfulness and sincerity, and I will love him; you know how I have struggled, you know what I have suffered: let us both blot all that part out now and for ever, Phœbe, and as you love me pray that I may be sustained in the wifely path of duty and obedience."

The Countess spoke like her former self in those past days before that cloud of sorrow fell upon Barton Hall; in those past days when she was the bailiff's daughter and the sisterly companion of her whom she had since supplanted in fortune and position.

The tears came into Phœbe's eyes again, and the two women embraced each other tenderly.

"Bless you, my own dear friend," said the Countess, "believe me, I will make reparation for

all my unkindness to you. There dear, do not reply—kiss me again and leave me—it is better I should be alone a little while."

Alone, the Countess fell upon her knees, and prayed with passionate fervency—prayed as she had not prayed since that change came over her on that never-to-be-forgotten day when she learnt of *his* departure—prayed as she had not prayed since that scheme of ambition leaped into her mind at the appearance of that carriage with the coronet on the panel.

She rose with a calm expression upon her face, refreshed by the outpouring of her supplications, and determined to do her duty in the high station to which she had risen, and towards her husband.

Unlocking a small dressing-case which stood near his lordship's latest present, she took out an inner drawer which was curiously concealed. Her hand trembled slightly as she withdrew the contents—a letter. It was *his* letter (if it might be called a letter)—the only memento of him which she possessed except in memory. There were only three

lines upon it, and these were written on the day following that day when they had walked together in Barton Hall gardens.

"Dearest—I shall be at Barton Hall at four o'clock to-morrow. Do not let me go away without seeing you. L. H." This was all the note contained. For long days and weeks and months afterwards she had treasured up that poor little scrap of paper—worn it in her bosom, wept over it, kissed it, and cherished the memory of that hour of happiness which followed it.

For a moment she held it in her hand hesitatingly. She felt that it was the only link between the present and the past. Lighting a vesta, she held the paper in the flame until it was consumed, and then she stamped her little satin-slippered foot upon the embers. The flame burnt her fingers before it went out, as if there were venom in the perjured words that the fire was consuming. But this was nothing to the fire which had seared her heart long since, burning into it those serpent words that had looked so fair only to sting the deeper.

But it was over at last, and now she was Countess of Verner.

"My lady" rung for her maid, and prepared to dress for the bridal journey. Whilst her robes were being removed she glanced round the room which had been furnished with so much magnificence for her reception, and then she thought, with a grateful smile, of the homage which her husband had paid her in all things.

The maid being asked some simple question, told her how the health of the bridesmaids had been proposed, and how her ladyship's handsome brother had made a beautiful speech in reply. This she thought would please her ladyship very much indeed; but it only excited uncomfortable thoughts in her ladyship's mind—a vague kind of danger seemed to threaten her through Richard Tallant.

Her ladyship asked no more questions, but went through the elaborate process of her toilette in silence, and by-and-by left the room robed in purple moire, and lace, and looking every inch a countess, to the everlasting envy of Lady Pether-

ington and her youngest sister, and to the delight of her husband and the rest.

All this time the bells at Severntown, Avonworth, and Brazencrook rung out over town and field and river. The summer air was full of their glorious old music. The ringers in their shirt sleeves pulled with a will, until the churches fairly shook again. Mighty jugs of ale passed from hand to hand, from lip to lip, in the intervals of this labour of love, and majors and triple bob-majors and all kinds of curious changes were performed on the swinging bells. Avonworth caught the faint echoes from Severntown, and Brazencrook, picking up the trembling tones from Avonworth, took them up into its own ringing measure, and carried the grand old-fashioned harmonies away down the river to distant villages, where women stood at cottage doors and listened, and men rested on their scythes to wonder why Brazencrook bells were ringing.

Glorious bells, merry bells, wedding bells! Arthur Phillips sat in his studio with the windows wide open listening to the joyous music, and think-

ing of the peal that would soon ring out the news of another marriage. He looked away beyond the Linktown hills in the direction of London, thought of his darling Phœbe in her bridesmaid's dress, and pictured her, in a wreath of orange blossoms at a country church, by a time-sanctified altar in Avonworth Valley.

Happy bells, tuneful bells, olden bells, wedding bells! Luke Somerton heard them as he sat with his wife at the Hall Farm, and puzzled his brain with all sorts of vague happy fancies that seemed to soar upwards in the smoke of his early after-dinner pipe. His wife spoke cheerily of the music, but it was a great struggle for her. Something would whisper in her ear that the Countess might perhaps have been her daughter, but the next moment she remembered that Phœbe was there as her ladyship's friend, and that Lieutenant Somerton was amongst the distinguished visitors. That strange dream of ambition, you see, had not all passed away from the proud Lincolnshire woman's heart.

Joyful bells, brazen bells, jubilant bells, wedding

bells! Travel your happy strains adown that glimmering river; no whisper of your tender music can reach that home-bound ship that rides on the Indian sea.

CHAPTER II.

"YET OFT O'ER CREDULOUS YOUTH SUCH SIRENS TRIUMPH, AND LEAD THEIR CAPTIVE SENSE IN CHAINS AS STRONG AS ADAMANT."

THE day after the marriage of Miss Tallant, Lieutenant Somerton sat in Mrs. Dibble's front parlour, discussing, with her interesting lodger, the details of his scheme for the future.

Embellished with several pictures and vases, a lady's easy chair, and other little things which the Lieutenant had purchased from time to time, the room looked quite neat and attractive.

They would be content, Paul was telling her, with something a little better than this in their distant home, where they would begin the world all afresh, and remember nothing but their own true love for each other. "What an infatuated fool he must be, most renowned Asmodeo," Don

Cleofas would say. "Why, the young woman is vulgar too. Do you not notice how ignorant she is? And what shambling efforts she is making to hide it?" "You forget that my business," says Asmodeo, "is to make ridiculous matches, marry maids to their masters, greybeards to raw girls; and see here, you forget the cloak!" Refreshing his memory upon these points, Don Cleofas would be satisfied of course; and so must we; for Paul Somerton sees only charms in "Chrissy's" defects. We need hardly say that she had improved considerably in her manners since that conversation with Dibble at Severntown; she had long since ceased to call things "stunning" and "fizzing."

That gentleman, who was enamoured of her dexterity at cards, had done much to prune her exuberance of expression in this respect, and it was wonderful how quickly she further improved during her stay with Mrs. Dibble, not under the tuition of that elegant lady, but with the inspiration of Paul's books and her own cunning instinct.

She had often thought of that night when first she heard the name of Paul Somerton. "I know a young gentleman as would make such a sweetheart for you—such a sweetheart!" old Dibble had said. And her own remark—what if she should conjure into the basket that handsome Paul Somerton, who talked so fine! How strange that she had conjured him to her side! She wished she had seen him before she saw Crawley. Why did he not come into the Temple of Magic first? It was not her fault that he didn't. She would have had him for her husband sooner than she would have had that mean sneak, Crawley, who cared nothing at all about her, and who never admired her at all after they were married. And what a funny thing that she should be living with Dibble's wife! There were lots of murders and robberies, and other awful things in that tale in the *Weekly Sensation*, but her own story was certainly as strange as that of the young lady who was stolen by gipsies. She had not been confined in a castle, and left for dead in a cellar to be eaten

by rats, been rescued by her father, and afterwards stabbed the villain who had run away with her at first: none of these things had come to pass yet in her history; but there was no knowing how soon they might.

She was prepared at any moment, she felt, to enter the next phase of her career, whatever it might be, and had gone so far in her imitative insane fashion, as to sleep with a dagger beneath her pillow; but she secretly hoped that nothing would occur to prevent her flying with Paul. In her own fashion, she loved this mad-headed soldier, and she dreaded the discovery of her wickedness and deception. If she had been brought up in a respectable home, with moral influences about her and a mother at her elbow, she might perchance still have done justice to her home education, as she did now; but it is not necessary that we should enter into speculations upon this point. Her story is before us, and it is the duty of the writer to tell it fairly, and leave the reader to form his own opinion about what

education and good moral home influences might have done for this woman of the booth and the fair, the race-course and the gaming-room, who, with the brightness of youth still about her, managed, with syren-like skill, to look so innocent and attractive in the eyes of Paul Somerton.

The day after that grand wedding at St. George's, Hanover Square, Mrs. Dibble told Chrissy that her husband would be coming to pay her a visit in a week or two, and Chrissy knew that it was necessary she should leave Mrs. Dibble before that period: so she had talked of change of air, and Paul, given over to the reckless passion of his first love!—(Heaven save the mark!)—had resolved upon a quiet private wedding at Brighton that day week. The Lieutenant was just explaining his views when there came a loud knocking at the front door, and after considerable bustle and confusion in the little narrow passage, Mrs. Dibble burst into the room with her husband.

"Lor, Mithter Thomerton, Leftennant, thir,

Thomath thaith he mutht shake hands with you, and he hath come before hith time, becauth it wath more convenient, and I'm sure you will excuthe him, when you think of old times and——"

"Of course, of course," said Paul, wishing old Dibble at Hanover; "and how are you, Thomas? how do you do?"

Dibble made no reply, but allowed his hand to be shaken in the most condescending fashion, whilst he fixed his eyes upon the young lady.

"Why, deary me!" he exclaimed, all of a sudden, "Miss Christabel, how do you do? Well, who would ha' thought as I should find you at Mrs. Dibble's?"

The lady addressed looked at Mr. Dibble with the greatest possible astonishment, and then turned to Lieutenant Somerton, as if she sought some explanation of this extraordinary conduct.

"Daughter of the Northern magician, you know," said Dibble, addressing the Lieutenant;

"the cleverest young lady as ever I see. Lor' bless you, I——"

"What the devil do you mean!" exclaimed the Lieutenant.

"Surely the man is not sober," said the young lady in her finest style, and with just a faint smile at Dibble's bewildered look.

"It hain't the voice quite," said Dibble; "but it be Chrissy, you know; she was the mysterious lady and——"

"And what?" exclaimed the Lieutenant.

Before Dibble had time to answer he caught "Chrissy's" eye and its sudden expression of warning, such as that which he remembered coupled with her threats about the pistol; so he only stammered out something about being mistaken, and begging pardon ——

"You're alwayth making thome mithtake or other," said Mrs. Dibble; "there, come along in the next room. I'm thorry I allowed him to come in, Mithter Thomerton, but hith headth bewildered, no doubt, with having been away from

home tho much and having previouthly had my eye on him: and what he would do without ith a mythtery to me."

The Lieutenant said, "All right, Mrs. Dibble, don't apologise," and poor Dibble slunk away into the kitchen and sat down, Mrs. D. following.

"There, Thomath, never mind," said Mrs. Dibble in her blandest tones; "come and tell me all about it."

But Dibble remembered how clever that mysterious lady of the show was; how fierce she was, and he trembled at the bare idea of her exercising any of her black arts upon him, in case he should betray her secret. It was quite clear that she did not wish him to know her; but he had made no mistake at all, he was sure of that; and Mrs. Dibble was sharp enough to see that there was some mystery here which she would assuredly have cleared up before Dibble went to sleep that night.

An unfortunate night altogether was this for the "mysterious lady." Mr. Williamson had sent

a messenger to the house for Lieutenant Somerton soon after Dibble's strange arrival, and Paul had taken a cab, as requested, to the Temple, where he found the barrister in company with an unknown gentleman.

"This is Mr. Bales, the detective officer, of whom you have heard me speak," said the barrister.

Paul bowed.

"My friend, Lieutenant Somerton," said the barrister, introducing Paul.

The detective nodded in deliberate professional fashion.

"Mr. Bales has executed that old warrant to-day, and Shuffleton Gibbs, *alias* Mr. Jefferson Crawley, of Carr Court, Regent Street West, is now in custody. (Paul looked a little bewildered, and sat down.) Mr. Bales is a great friend of mine, and I tell him that it might not be advisable after all this time to reopen the case. Mr. Bales fears that we shall be compelled to proceed with it. But there is, it appears, some other case

against him, though not quite so clear as that of the pocket-book. Mr. Bales will call here again in an hour before anything further is done: meanwhile you and I will talk affairs over. Good-bye for the present, Bales."

The detective officer nodded in reply and left the room, and then Mr. Williamson, alluding to that first gleam of suspicion in connection with Paul's attempt to borrow money, went on to tell his friend that this woman whom Paul had made up his mind to marry was the wife of Shuffleton Gibbs. He believed he should be able to produce the marriage certificate. Gibbs knew where she was, and had told this to the detective. He had found her out within a week of her disappearance, through Macschawser, and he talked boldly of an action for abduction and other tremendous things.

Paul would not believe a word of it. His friend had surely entered into a plot against him. Then he remembered the strange conduct of Dibble, and hesitated.

"I have only one duty to perform in this matter," said the barrister, "and that is to show you the character of the precipice upon which you stand, and then leave you to your fate. Have you obtained the sanction for your change of regiment?"

"Yes," said Paul; "and the vessel sails next month."

"For the Cape of Good Hope?"

"Yes."

"Now, my dear boy, I know you believe in my friendship; will you permit me to investigate this affair for you, and undertake to give the facts proper consideration before you take further action?"

"I will," said Paul, "provided that in all you do you respect her feelings, and remember that I love this woman better than all the world."

Mr. Williamson shrugged his shoulders.

"I love her better than all the world, and I only consent to this active interference because I know she will come out of the inquiry clear.

The idea of her being Gibbs's wife is absurd," Paul went on.

"But supposing it is true?" said the barrister.

"I will suppose nothing. Why do you try to bring unhappiness between us? In less than a month we should have been on the sea to begin a new life in a new country—turning our backs upon the past."

"And upon your friends," said the barrister. "You would be leaving father and mother and sister and friends in the society of an abandoned woman."

"Mr. Williamson," exclaimed Paul, "I will not stand this!"

"In the society of an abandoned woman," repeated the barrister, "not like those poor people in the picture 'Seeking new Homes,' with the association of pure affection and honest noble aims of independence. Your whole life would have been blighted, your family disgraced, and yourself a miserable man."

"I will not get into a passion with you," said

Paul, "but I cannot stand this, so good night;" and before the barrister had time to intercept him, Paul rushed out of the room and hurried away into the street.

Meanwhile Mr. Bales returned. The barrister informed him that he thought it would be impossible to proceed with the case of conspiracy. The officer said he had another charge against the prisoner upon which he could secure a conviction, and so the two parted; the detective to complete his entry in the police charge-sheet and arrange for the appearance on the next day of certain witnessess, and Mr. Williamson to the residence of Mrs. Dibble, where he at once introduced himself to her interesting lodger as Lieut. Somerton's friend.

He did not hesitate at all about the part he should play. Assuming the position of Lieut. Somerton's legal adviser, he told the lady that Paul knew everything, and when she assumed an injured and indignant air, he showed her a copy of that very marriage certificate which she had

burnt. Nay more; he said that he knew where her father the showman was to be found, and that her husband, who was in custody, had explained everything to the policeman who had apprehended him.

And yet whilst the barrister was utterly crushing the girl, and even threatening her with a police cell, he felt a strange interest in her. The remembrance of a well-known face which had fascinated him when a boy came so vividly into his mind as he stood before the showman's daughter, that he grew strangely embarrassed in his manner. Shortly, his assumed austerity gave way, and he found himself speaking very gently and tenderly.

The girl was quick enough to observe this, and she proceeded at once to make capital out of it, appealing to his kindness and sympathy, assuring him that she loved his friend with all her heart, acknowledging to the full how she had deceived him, and then humbly soliciting the barrister's advice.

Old memories came back to the barrister as the woman continued to talk, and her tears did not fail to soften the hues of that picture of old which would rise up between himself and the humiliated woman before him. Leading her on from one topic to another he induced her to narrate her history, and by slow degrees she repeated to him the heads of the story which she had told Dibble on the Severntown race-course. Feeling sure that this would excite the barrister's sympathy, she hoped that it might in some way make him her friend.

Watching the effect of all she was saying, the girl perceived that her listener was peculiarly touched; and when at the proper moment she produced that little miniature which she had shown to Dibble, Mr. Arundel Williamson, exclaiming "Good heavens, can it be possible!" threw himself back in his chair and nearly fainted.

Fixing her eyes upon him as he grasped the locket, the woman, with the cunning of the race-course and the lodging-house, the precocity of poverty, and her fixed faith in Carkey's prophecy

about her parentage, felt at once that the hour of discovery had come.

"You are my father!" she said, with an air of pride and triumph. "That lady was your wife."

"God help us!" said the barrister solemnly. "He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children indeed!"

"You won't drive me away now," said the girl quickly; "you won't try to make him hate me, and put me in prison now. If you don't like me to be your daughter, let me go away with him; tell him all that about Gibbs is a lie,—he will believe you—he will believe anything—don't separate us—I will never tell anybody you are my father."

The barrister made no reply; he rocked himself to and fro in his chair, and looked vacantly at the girl, as if he were in a dream.

"I am your father," said the barrister presently; "there is no doubt about that. The sin and the punishment are so equal, and the parentage is so fearfully verified in your own career and conduct:

there is no cheating heaven, no tricking the law of punishment in this world. God knows I have suffered too, without this additional pain and degradation."

"You're ashamed of me, then?" said the woman. "Lieutenant Somerton is not; let me go away with him."

"Never!" exclaimed the barrister: "never!"

"Well, it thertainly ith the motht exthraordinary thing I ever heard of," whispered Mrs. Dibble to herself and Thomas in the passage after she had been listening at the keyhole for nearly half an hour: "motht wonderful. Now come here, thir, and juth tell me all you know about that woman. It's bad enough to have one's money lotht and brought to poverty, without secrets of this sort being kept away from the lawful wife of your bootham, Mithter Dibble. You thall tell me every word before you go to bed."

Dibble struggled a little against this decree, but without avail. Whilst he was telling his wife all

that he knew about Christabel, Mr. Williamson was endeavouring to bring that remarkable young woman to a sense of her position. To what extent he succeeded we may hope to learn hereafter.

CHAPTER III.

COMING HOME.

Yes, they were coming home; the Earl and Countess of Verner were coming home. The "Severntown Mercury" said so, and mentioned the exact day on which they would return. Nay, more, the accomplished journalist announced that during that very week his lordship had accepted the colonelship of the Severnshire Yeomanry, and that the local troop would receive the distinguished couple at the Severntown Station, and escort them to the Junction, from whence they would continue their journey to Avonworth. A member of the oldest county family, and the most distinguished of the local aristocracy, the "Mercury" suggested that the civic authorities should show his lordship some mark of their respect as he passed through

the ancient city on his way to the historic home of his fathers.

The Right Honourable the Earl Verner was descended from that famous Verner who figured so magnificently in the early days of the reign of Henry IV. In the tournaments of that time, Henry, Earl Verner, was the bravest and most formidable of all the gallants of the period. He fought like a lion at the battle of Shrewsbury, and served the king in various parts of the country with unequalled bravery and success. The Verners had always been splendid men. There was another of the race who distinguished himself as highly in the senate as the Verner of Henry IV.'s time had in the field. It was to this senator that England owed so much in those critical times when the doctrines of the French Revolution were making progress in our own country. The Earl's speech in parliament upon this grand question was one of the most powerful orations in history. He filled several high offices of state, and his fine administrative ability could be traced throughout the important

epoch in which he lived. The present earl, though he had hitherto taken no lead in public affairs, was an accomplished scholar, and had contributed several important pamphlets to the literature of art and antiquity; and he would, no doubt, now take that position in the county to which his family distinction, his accomplishments, and his great wealth entitled him.

The Countess of Verner had also sprung of a stock not by any means of small celebrity. Her parentage might be said to have represented the aristocracy of birth and commercial enterprise. Her father, the late Christopher Tallant, Esq., had ranked high amongst the merchant princes of Great Britain, and had come of an old Yorkshire family. Her mother, a lady of the noble house of Petherington, was a descendant of the Petheringtons of Fife. The Lord Petherington of that Ilk it was who distinguished himself in Egypt in 1800, and who fell fighting the battles of his country in Spain. Celebrated for their beauty, the daughters of the house of Petherington would be

familiar to those admirers of "female loveliness" who had studied "Garton's Beauties of the Court."

The "Mercury" grew quite eloquent in its historical revelations, and Severntown resolved, in accordance with the editorial hint, that the Earl and Countess should be "received" at the station, and escorted to the junction in right royal fashion. So, when the day came, there was quite a crowd of people at the station. A troop of the Yeomanry Cavalry were there, and their horses pranced and curvetted, and stood upon two legs, in the most approved military fashion; a number of ladies who had seats upon the platform, presented the Countess with a handsome bracelet and a charming bouquet of flowers; the mayor came forward, and made a pretty little speech to the newly-married pair; and the Earl replied in a hearty address. Then his lordship conducted his wife to a carriage, and drove off to the junction, amidst great cheering, in company with the gallant Yeomanry on their prancing steeds.

But it was at Brazencrook where the greatest demonstration was made. Severntown was somewhat proud and dignified; but Brazencrook was full of rejoicing. Nearly the whole of the longest street in Brazencrook belonged to Earl Verner, and the people had always been warmly attached to the noble proprietors of the Castle of Montem. Brazencrook was the nearest station to the castle, and Brazencrook determined to make the return home something not to be forgotten. The Town-clerk had been instructed to prepare an address for the occasion. The cordwainers of the place had made the Countess a pair of dainty slippers; the glass-cutters had manufactured and made wonderful toilet-bottles for her; the ladies of the town had subscribed for a gold casket; and the civic authorities had ordered the town to be decorated, and the bells to be rung in honour of their distinguished friends and neighbours.

The old Guildhall was carpeted, and a daïs erected in the ancient assembly-room. The earl had consented to bring his wife here to receive the

civic congratulations and the big town's presents. Brazencrook had always been celebrated for doing things well; it was one of the leading mottoes of the local newspaper, that "if it was worth while to do anything it was worth while to do it well." Thus the welcoming home of the earl and countess grew and grew out of the first proposals into a demonstration worthy of royalty. If our friend Asmodeus had taken you there on the morning of the celebration of this return-home, you might have fancied that you had been transported back to the "good old times" of provincial display. The visit of a queen, the close of a three weeks' election, the termination of a great war, the inauguration of some old-world revels, or something on an ancient scale of grandeur, would have seemed to be manifested in those fluttering flags and banners; those half-military men in the streets; that ox roasting in the market-place; those great casks of ale ready tapped under the ancient piazzas of the market-house. Bands playing, bells ringing, shops closed, triumphal arches receiving the last-finishing touches,

old gabled houses with devices painted up between the windows, Odd-Fellows in sashes and aprons, gentlemen with white rosettes on their breasts, women with babies in their arms, boys climbing lamp-posts, and again Yeomanry Cavalry with brass helmets and unmanageable horses, Brazencrook had never presented such a scene of jubilation and bustle. The fine old town seemed to rub its jolly big hands, and say, "How do you do, everybody—glad to see you. Have a drink—we are going to enjoy ourself to-day. It is a little foolish to make such a tremendous fuss, we know; but never mind;—better to do a thing well, if you do it at all, you know."

Somebody had drawn an allegorical figure of the town, and it had been sculptured by a famous artist. It was a brawny athletic man, with a hammer in his hand, leaning upon a rock from which water was supposed to be bursting forth—the source of the river upon which the town was built. If the figure could have spoken it would have said something like what we have just written,

and it might have laid down its hammer and smiled pleasantly at the Brazencrookians as they bustled about on that memorable morning.

There was a glow of pride and delight upon the rosy cheeks of the Countess as she sat by her lord in that pretty open brougham which conveyed them to the Guildhall. It was like the reception of a prince and princess. Lord Verner bowed like a king to his bending subjects, and the Countess smiled and bowed with a gracious condescension that was quite charming to see. The people cheered and shouted and threw up their hats, and "Welcome Home," "Long Life and Happiness," and good wishes of all kinds greeted them from nearly every banner and triumphal arch.

Meanwhile a dense crowd congregated at the Guildhall, and a fashionable throng was congregated within. There had been many local feuds about places. The town-councillors had to be accommodated first, and their wives next, and we regret to say that quarrels which time will never heal arose out of the preference shown to

some ladies over others in the selection of the committee to represent the ladies who had subscribed for the casket. It was quite grand to see the aldermen in their blue cloaks and chains, the councillors in their gowns, the mayor in his cocked hat, the sword-bearers with their fur helmets on and their beavers up. Then there were the mayor's officers in their new liveries, and his Worship's own footman with a bouquet in his waistcoat as big and as round as his own rubicund face. The military pensioners with their shining accoutrements were drawn up in line ready to present arms. Even Earl Verner was struck with surprise and amazement as his coachman pulled up opposite the hall. What a scene it was, to be sure! "Eyes front—fix bayonets—present a-r-r-r-rms!" could be heard half way down the street, as a fierce old officer, on a plunging horse and half pay, thundered out these commands to the pensioners; and then, oh, how his stentorian voice was drowned with drums and fifes and "hip-hip-hip-hurrahs!"

The Countess began to feel terribly nervous as his lordship handed her out and introduced her to the mayor, who offered his arm and marched magnificently into the Guildhall along the crowded corridor and into the great assembly room, where a thousand well-dressed persons rose to receive the noble visitors. Onward through the smiling throng, with his head in the air and the Countess by his side, went the Mayor of Brazencrook, up to the daïs of crimson cloth, where the Countess sat down in a gilded chair of state, and the Earl stood beside her, his lordship looking almost as proud as his Worship the Mayor himself.

Suddenly the Countess recognised Phœbe, Arthur Phillips and the bailiff sitting close by. She rose instantly, advanced towards them, and the next moment had kissed her friend with a heartiness that made the tears come into Phœbe's eyes, and quite electrified everybody. Who was the lady whom she had kissed? Everybody asked everybody else, and nobody knew. Who was that strange looking little man with long black hair?

And who was that fine-looking country gentleman? Nobody knew, and everybody made a guess in reply, so that there was quite a buzz of conversation. Then the Mayor introduced the aldermen, who had all promised to introduce their wives and didn't; then the Mayoress was introduced, and the Countess shook hands with her, and so did the Earl; whereupon several friends of the chief magistrate's wife said the Mayoress was "stuck up," and a score of other ladies said the whole affair was a perfect farce, and they certainly would not have sanctioned it if they had known there was going to be so much nonsense. Who was the Countess, they would like to know? Nobody but a merchant's daughter, and her husband old enough to be her father. And who was the Mayoress?—a seedsman's wife,—and what a bonnet! It was a pity people should make themselves so ridiculous! And the Countess too; there were women in the room quite as handsome and quite as graceful. Fine feathers made fine birds!

The Countess might fairly have disputed the prize for beauty with all Severnshire, nevertheless; her chiefest competitor, to our mind, would have been the artist's *fiancée*, but the two styles of beauty were entirely different, as our readers know.

It was not long ere the Town Clerk had read the civic address, and the various presents were made. The Earl replied in a manner that promised all the old borough hoped for with regard to the future; whilst the Countess said a few words of thankfulness, which were so gracious, so sweet, so becoming, so perfectly modest, that even the ladies who had been excluded from the committee aforesaid could not resist joining in the general expressions of approval.

How sincerely the Countess vowed in her own heart to be an obedient and faithful wife to this man who had raised her to such a height of distinction! He had never seen her look so affectionately upon him as when they were once more moving on their way to his magnificent house at Montem. The welcome which they had received

at Brazencrook was of such a right royal kind, that it kindled not only sensations of pride in the woman's heart, but feelings of the deepest gratitude. The sublime and the ridiculous are often to be seen in very close proximity. The Countess could not fail to notice some of the laughable incidents of the Brazencrook display, but she felt to the full the earnestness of the scene, the manliness of the civic address, the outspoken, independent allegiance of the great body of her husband's tenants, represented by a fine old man, who talked of the ancient days of Brazencrook, and how the retainers of the House of Verner had fought, under previous earls, the battles of their king and country. But it was the arrival at Montem Castle itself which most impressed the Countess. That long drive through the luxurious park, that long line of citizen soldiers, that body of local tenants at the castle gates, those loud cheers, that other address of welcome, the bending servants in the grand old hall, and the gracious words of the Earl introducing her as the mistress of Montem Castle.

She wept tears of joy and gratitude. There was no acting in this. When she saw Earl Verner first she had commenced to act a part which she hoped might lead up to some such scene as this; but she had never imagined that the actress would weep real tears, and feel a deep and fervent gratitude to the nobleman who had taken her hand and placed her by his side.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAVELLERS BY LAND AND SEA.

In the morning after Mr. Williamson's discovery of his daughter, Lieutenant Somerton sought the woman whom he had loved so wildly—he sought her with a troubled heart, and a half resolve to see her no more, if she had deceived him so grossly as the barrister had intimated. He had thought long and seriously over all the circumstances which his friend had laid before him, and he resolved to search out the truth.

When he reached the house, however, he was spared the scene of anger, mutual explanation, and final triumph of love and frenzy which he had imagined. The bird had flown; there was no Chrissy in the little house with the trees at the back. The rooms were deserted, and Mrs. Dibble

sat weeping over the *débris* of a hasty packing-up.

"She'th gone, thir: gone for ever," said Mrs. Dibble.

"Yes," said Thomas, who stood by, looking more frightened than sympathetic.

"Gone—what do you mean?" asked the Lieutenant.

"She wath a wicked creature, thir, and she hath fled," said Mrs. Dibble; "if my poor dear papa could only rise from his grave and see the path to which hith daughter Maria hath come."

"Hang your papa!" exclaimed Paul; "tell me what all this means."

"How dare you, thir," said Mrs. Dibble, starting up; "how dare you hang my papa! Ah, I forgot, of courthe poverty mutht be insulted, and I am a wretched dependent, though I have had a boarding-school education, and been brought up to——"

"Confound it, Mrs. Dibble: will you talk common sense for a moment. I don't wish to insult

you, nor to be unkind in any way. Will you tell me how it is that this lady has left your house?"

"Here is a note," said Mr. Dibble, timidly taking a small *billet* from the mantel-piece.

Mrs. Dibble scowled at her husband, and began to weep afresh over her fallen fortunes.

Paul hastily opened the note, which Dibble gave to him, and read as follows:—

"My dear Paul,—I have saved you from a great sin and from terrible misery. This wretched girl is my daughter. I have taken her away; do not seek to follow us. You shall know *all* in the course of a day or two. 'He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate him, and shows mercy unto thousands in them that love Him and keep His commandments.'

"Believe me to be ever yours in truth
and affection,

"A. Williamson."

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
LIBRARY

Paul read the note twice and in the greatest astonishment. His mind was in a chaos of wonder and amazement. He sat down upon a chair, and read the strange words over and over again, until Dibble interrupted him.

"It was all true, sir," said Dibble, "what I said yesterday; she was the show-girl, Chrissy, who conjured, you know, sir, at Severntown."

Paul made no reply.

Mrs. Dibble only nodded her head to signify that she had had a boarding-school education, and had been brought to this wretched plight, nevertheless.

"She be main clever, surely," said Dibble, "and improved wonderful."

"When did she leave here?" asked Paul, looking to Mrs. Dibble for a reply.

"Before daylight, by the mail," she said; "and what with packing and Mr. Williamson's fidgeting and going on, and his wild ways, I hope I shall never see such a night again."

"They left together," said Paul, staring vacantly at the barrister's note.

"Yeth, and Dibble fetched the cab."

"Did she seem willing to go; did she leave any message for me?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Dibble. "She wath willing enough to go; but anybody would have been willing to do whatever he thaid, he theemed to order about so."

"Order! in what way?" asked the Lieutenant.

"Why, ath if he were her father, which he thaid he wath, though that wath never to be repeated to anybody but you, and he went home and brought some money, and wath motht liberal for all we had done, though I thertainly would have returned it if Mithter Dibble had not lotht money in the panic, and that bank had not broke, which left uth almost in poverty."

The Lieutenant took little or no notice of Mrs. Dibble's long speeches, but they were full of daggers to Thomas Dibble, who would have laid down his life if he could have obtained money enough to put an end to his wife's taunts about their losses.

Paul was altogether at a loss to know how to act.

His first impulse was to make an effort to follow the fugitives; his first impression was that his friend had behaved treacherously; but when Dibble told him all he knew about "Chrissy," and her belief that her father was a gentleman, and when he thought again of all that Williamson had said, and of the dark shadows upon his early life, he resolved that he would try to be patient, and wait for the next chapter in this extraordinary story of his first love.

Meanwhile the fugitives were speeding on their way to Dover, their destination being Paris. Whilst they were leaving England, a traveller was journeying to London in whom the reader has a still greater interest. Lionel Hammerton was coming home. He had only been a few months at his post ere he left it. Nobody knew why he did so, or upon what plea he had obtained permission. He had not been well, his comrades knew; but a general depression of spirits rather than any physical complaint seemed to be the secret of his reticence and retirement. On board the vessel in

which he went out his conduct was set down to the motion of the vessel, and a few harmless jests were made at his expense. He was advised to drink plenty of brandy and water, which would soon bring his sea legs all right; but Lionel Hammerton did not recover, except when he drank more brandy than was good for him. Now and then this occurred, and at such times he was pronounced to be a splendid fellow, a dashing, daring, high-souled fellow.

Lionel himself hardly knew why he wished to return home. He felt impelled by an unseen influence. Like the hero of some ghost story who at Christmas had seen by his bedside the face of a loved one at home, and a beckoning finger which haunted him day and night until he set foot on board a home-bound ship, Lionel Hammerton could think of nothing but returning home. There was something wrong, he could not rest, he must go home and see the old country once more ere he settled down in India. For days and weeks he struggled against this instinctive longing to re-cross

the ocean. That vignette which Arthur Phillips had painted hung by his bed, inside those mosquito curtains! Had this aught to do with his desire to return home? Did he repent of his neglect towards Amy? Did he love her after all? Did the memory of those happy days at Barton torture him with remorse? Or had that idea of Amy's mercenary motives evaporated in presence of that honest and noble face, about which he had talked so rapturously in the artist's studio? If so, why did he not write to her and say so, or send some message to her by Arthur Phillips? This would have been easy enough, and sufficient too for Amy, who would have caught at the merest straw that offered a prospect of regaining his love.

They passed each other on the sea, the two Indian ships — one homeward-bound with Hammerton on board, the other on its way to Calcutta with letters for him, and full particulars of his brother's marriage. What a world of trouble might have been spared to him and others, had he yielded at once to those home-promptings, or

waited until those letters and papers had reached their destination!

As the vessel bounded along through the waters, Lionel shaped his course. He was fain to confess that he wanted to see Amy, to see her once more, and judge for himself by her own words and conduct whether she truly loved him, or whether it was a mere mercenary passion. It was a long time before he confessed even to himself that it was she who drew him back to England—he could not rest without her. If she were really true, true as the artist had painted her, true as he once believed her, he would confess all to his brother, and ask Amy to return with him to India as his wife. What a fool he had been, he thought, to doubt her, and to come away without seeing her. What a miserable lonely life it was out there in India without a soul you cared for. How happy to have a wife there! No fellow ought to go out to India without one. And what did it matter about a woman's origin in India, so that she was a lady in manners, and the wife of an officer of rank in his own right? Why had

he not thought of all this before? It was only by degrees that he had permitted his thoughts to run wild like this. The sea seemed to help him out of his troubles; it was so boundless, so full of life and beauty. His thoughts appeared to mount the white-crested waves and travel away upon them to some quiet sandy beach where Amy was walking. Now that he had confessed to himself why he was returning to England, he gave his imagination the freest rein, and pictured the future as something almost preternaturally happy. He never doubted for a moment that when he came back to Barton Hall and threw his handkerchief at the feet of Amy she would pick it up and be his slave. That pride which had had so large a share in his leaving England and neglecting the woman whose love he had taken the trouble to win, did not desert him on his return.

When he set foot in London he hesitated whether he should go straight to Montem, run down to Arthur Phillips' at Severntown, or take the train to Avonworth. It had occurred to him more than

once to visit Amy secretly; but his better sense prompted him to write a note to his brother telling him that he should visit him the next day, hoping to return again to India by an early mail.

"He will be surprised," Lionel thought "to receive this; but he is a dear old boy after all, and I will soon put him all right. I wish I had had nothing to do with that infernal Stock-Exchange business. I should then have had no qualms at all about meeting him again so suddenly."

The hon. officer of her Majesty spent the evening of his return to England at Drury Lane, and his magnanimous intentions with regard to Amy were stimulated by the action of a drama, the chief lesson of which was the levelling power of love, and the exaltation of beauty and virtue above rank and fortune. Lionel went home to his hotel in quite a sentimental mood, longing to confess his unchanging love and receive Amy's grateful acknowledgments of the sacrifice which he was willing to make for her, raising the bailiff's daughter to his own rank and making her his wife and companion.

CHAPTER V.

LORD AND LADY VERNER.

A DELIGHTFUL September morning inaugurated the second day of the return home to Montem Castle. The sun shone upon the grand old towers which stood out in clear outline against the sky; and upon the old ruin with its moss-grown walls and whispering ivy, a grey old token of the past, with a long line of green turf stretching forth to the more modern castle which had been built in presence of the ancient ruin. The modern establishment had been built as closely as possible after the old model, and furnished too in antique style, but with all modern comforts.

As far as the eye could see, stretched the noble park with grand old trees sheltering groups of deer. From the terrace in front of the castle half a mile

of turf, interspersed with beds of flowers and shrubs and winding walks and natural glints of rock terminated in a broad expanse of lake, ornamented with sundry islands that looked in the distance like floating gardens. Far away against the sky the Berne Hills melted as it were into the Linktowns, whose topmost point was hung with a misty mantle which the sunbeams fringed with gold.

The Earl and Countess of Verner sat at breakfast two mornings after their return home in presence of this glorious scene. The windows were wide open, letting in the perfume of autumn flowers, the song of birds, the sound of plashing water flowing from an adjacent fountain. What a paradise it was! Would Amy make it a desert? We shall see.

When her husband said they might expect his brother during the day, Amy's cheeks lost their colour for a moment, and her hand trembled; but the change was not noticed, and a strong effort of will at once restored the wife's self-control. The announcement was so unexpected; all her specula-

tions had not prepared her for so sudden an appearance. She had expected to meet this man some day, and had thought about her manner of receiving him; but she had never dreamed that the trial would come so soon.

"Shut the window, Morris," said his lordship, "the air is rather chilly, her ladyship will take cold."

"Thank you," said the Countess, gently.

"You have met my brother, I think," said the Earl.

"Yes, at Barton," said Amy, promptly, but with a cold chill at her heart.

"Rather a strange fellow. Why he should return home so soon, I cannot understand. You may leave the room, Morris."

Morris and his second in command bowed and retired.

"There was a time when I could not bear Morris to be away from my elbow for a moment," said his lordship, "and now I would rather the fellow were a mile off when you are here, my

darling; there is no chatting freely to one's wife with that booby swallowing every word."

His lordship looked across the table at the Countess in her white morning-robe, and smiled. "I positively envy those Darby-and-Joan people of the middle class, who are not bothered with a regiment of servants."

The Countess looked up and said there were Darbys and Joans, she hoped, in halls and castles.

"I know of one couple," said his lordship, cheerily. "George and Amy are their names, and they will be candidates for the Dunmow Flitch. Lionel Hammerton can hardly have heard of our marriage."

"Not heard of it?" said the Countess. This was a new feature of the case which had not presented itself to her mind.

"Unless the outward mail made a very quick passage indeed, he has not heard of it; I question whether he can be acquainted with any of the changes that have taken place in our fortunes during the past year."

"What a surprise it will be for him," said the Countess.

"Indeed, it will," said his lordship.

"Was not his departure a very sudden affair?" asked the Countess.

"Not particularly so, my love," said the Earl. "We had not contemplated his entering the army—that was his freak. He indulged in the luxury of speculation rather extensively, and I think I was a little emphatic in condemning his large and useless expenditure. I feared he was making ties of friendship which were not beneficial to him. Perhaps I said so. In an excitable moment he said it would be better for him to join the army, and go abroad for a few years. I dislike discussing these personal questions; it rather bored me at the time, I remember; and I said I thought it would be best. And so he made his own arrangements."

"Then he knew that he was about to leave the country some time before he went away," said the Countess.

"Yes, he was Gazetted soon after our serious

conversation, as he called it, and sailed a month or two afterwards I think. I knew he would soon be tired of it, but I had no idea that his return would be so sudden. He will hardly know the place. I never saw so great and complete an improvement as there appears in the grounds, and the general re-arrangement of the house. The whole place is changed, and with a mistress at the head of affairs, I seem to be quite in a new world, quite. And what a delightful world it is, Amy!"

His lordship was charmed with his wife, and with everything around him. The servants did not see a greater change in Montem Castle than they saw in the noble master thereof. From a quiet, retiring, luxurious student, who buried himself in his books, and lost himself in continual admiration of his pottery or pictures, he had become a lively, chatty, merry gentleman. Formerly, with a continual fear that he was going to be bored, he had guarded himself as carefully as though he were a confirmed invalid. No noises, no open windows, as few visitors as possible; he had

appeared to mope away existence, and Brazencrook looked forward to a speedy successor in Lionel Hammerton; but old Morris and the butler both said cracked jugs often lasted the longest, and that ailing men mostly made old bones. Even they, however, were surprised beyond expression at his lordship. It was marvel enough that he should marry, but that he should have a really grand wedding, and make public speeches, and come home "livelier than a cricket, sir," as Morris said, was something which they could never cease to wonder at.

He loved his wife with all that fervency which often marks the love of an old bachelor, who is fascinated out of his former course of life by a beautiful woman bent on winning him. There was nothing that he would not have done to add to her comfort and happiness. All his bachelor ways, his fogeyism, his books, his pictures, his china, none of them could weigh in attractiveness against the delight of giving her the smallest pleasure. Her ladyship knew this, and resolved to interfere as

little as possible with his habits and general course of life; she would join him in his studies and in his pleasures she vowed, and be his companion indeed.

She would also govern his household, and perform her wifely duties to the letter. Were she twenty times a countess she would take her place as the responsible head of the domestic government. She would give her commands for the day, and do all things in order, as a wife should.

"You shall do whatever you please, my dear," said his lordship, upon the mention of this item in her wifely programme. "You are mistress here, but do not rob me too much of your society; and one thing I must insist upon."

The Countess, who had risen and was standing with her hand in his, smiled archly at the idea of his insisting upon anything.

"Yes, I *must* insist; you are to remember that my name is George here, just as it was when we were in Kent, and that I am to have a kiss always when we part, you as you say on your morning duties, I to wait your pleasure in the library."

The Countess promised faithful compliance with this command, and went on her way to the housekeeper's room to signify her pleasure with regard to the arrangements of the day. Amy (for we are privileged to call her Amy still, and shall insist upon an occasional exercise of that privilege) entered upon her domestic reign so mildly, and with such unaffected modesty, that the old housekeeper gladly obeyed her behests, though this extraordinary interference, on the part of a lady and a countess, with household affairs was the subject of some slight mutinous discussion that day in the housekeeper's room and in the butler's pantry too.

Having discharged these morning duties to her own satisfaction by an inauguration of her system, the Countess ascended the grand old staircase and sought her boudoir, where she sat down to discuss with herself and consider the situation which Lionel Hammerton's letter had created. She had refrained from asking many questions which her heart had prompted her to ask at breakfast, fearing

that she was not altogether fulfilling her part of the solemn contract she had entered into, by learning from her husband the motives which had actuated her lover without confessing how much she knew of his brother. All she had sought to learn was in the way of justification of her own conduct, and she had been strengthened in this by his lordship's replies. How should she meet Mr. Hammerton? How much did he know of recent events to prepare him for the change at Montem Castle? How far might surprise betray him or her?

Whilst she was thinking of these things the sound of wheels attracted her attention, and the next moment she saw one of the Earl's close carriages, with luggage on the roof, approaching the main entrance. The conveyance had been to Brazencrook Station to meet Mr. Hammerton. She had no doubt he had arrived. She watched the brougham roll along the great drive, through the autumn-tinted trees—watched it, as she had on another memorable autumn-day watched Earl

Verner's carriage whirl along, through the dying leaves, to Barton Hall. It was a coincidence which struck her forcibly these two autumn days, and seemed to bode evil to her. Did she love this man who had won her heart in those past days, and whose neglect had urged her into a scheme of revenge? She asked herself the question fearlessly, and her heart said No; but still there was fear in the answer—a momentary fear that it were better Lionel Hammerton were in India than here. Contrasting his conduct with that of the Earl, remembering how niggardly he had been, in those early days, of tender words, and how he had rather seemed to revel in her own silent admiration than delight in her love; and how devoted the Earl was; how noble, how generous; how he had raised her up not thinking he had done so, but thanking her for his own happiness—thanking her that she had consented to be the mistress of these grand old halls, and the successor of a long line of countesses who lived in the history of titles and beauty. Contrasting the two thus, Lionel Hammerton took

but an abject place, and Amy's heart overflowed with gratitude to the man whom she had sworn to love, honour, and obey.

Ringing for her maid, the Countess took a fancy to have her hair dressed afresh, and then she put on a plainer dress, and in a little time there came a message from his lordship that Mr. Hammerton had arrived, and would lunch with them.

The Countess expected this, and was preparing for it. When she had dismissed her maid, she surveyed herself fixedly in a mirror, as if she were practising some peculiar expression. She was nervous, and wished the day at an end. Why had he come here? If he knew of his brother's marriage, it would have been far nobler to have remained away from the place? Did he know of it?

Let us answer that question to the reader. Lionel Hammerton heard of his brother's marriage for the first time from the servants at the Brazencrook Station. He heard it, and with no pleasure; for although he loved his brother with a generous

affection, he had come to expect that some day, in the ordinary course of nature, he would be called upon to succeed him. Not only did the disparity of years lead to this supposition (they were the offspring of two different mothers, the former Earl having married twice), but the general opinion was that the younger brother was so much stronger than the eldest, that he must live out the other. This marriage, therefore, seemed to set up an obstacle to his hopes. But the news did not affect him half so much as might have been expected. The strongest feeling about it, we are bound to say, was one of surprise, which was not a little increased when he learnt that Christopher Tallant's daughter was his brother's wife.

All the way to the Castle he pondered over this extraordinary fact, and wondered how it was with his poor friend, Arthur Phillips. There was one thing which gave him comfort: if his brother could descend to marrying a commoner's daughter, surely he, a mere officer in the army, might marry Amy, the daughter of the commoner's bailiff.

This thought in some measure revived his spirits, which had been dashed on the first blush of the matrimonial news. He could hardly believe but what there was some mistake, but when he saw the trim flower beds, the new gravel walks, the trim sunblinds, the cheerful brightness of the windows, he felt that the bachelor days of Montem were certainly at an end. "How odd," he thought, "to take sweet counsel with my brother's wife about Amy Somerton; I will confide all to her ladyship before I say anything to George—fancy Miss Tallant, Countess of Verner, my sister-in-law. No wonder I was prompted to come back to England!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH DAME FORTUNE PLAYS OFF HER GRIM JOKE UPON LIONEL HAMMERTON.

"Let me congratulate you, George," were the first words which Lionel addressed to his brother; "let me congratulate you upon your marriage with the prettiest of charming women."

"Thank you, thank you," said the Earl, taking Lionel's hand; "rather unexpected, eh?—never thought I should marry, eh, Lionel?"

"No, I certainly did not," said Lionel.

"The confirmed old bachelor, who could not be bored with a wife, eh?—the lazy old fellow, too selfish to marry, eh?" said his lordship, laughing aloud and rubbing his hands. "Did the wonderful news bring you home?"

"No; I heard for the first time of your marriage,

at Brazencrook. When I left India I hardly knew why I left; but I think I shall be able to tell you all about it in due time."

"Well, no matter; you know you are always welcome, Lionel—always; my home is yours, dear boy."

"I know that, my dear George," said Lionel, who again took his brother's proffered hand, and shook it heartily.

"You will find your old room in the old place," said the Earl. "No change there, except perhaps a little extra decoration. When you are ready, come to me in the library, and you shall have an introduction to your sister-in-law."

"Delighted to renew the lady's acquaintance in her new and distinguished position," said Lionel, leaving his brother smiling and nodding at the foot of the principal staircase.

The old room was in the old place, at the end of the picture gallery, and Lionel found no change there for the worse. He found Morris there unpacking his portmanteaus; and he joked the old

fellow, and asked him when he would be married. Morris thought the jest rather grim, and said it was certainly time for him to think about it, now that his lordship had taken a wife.

"Her ladyship is pretty, Morris, is she not?" said Lionel, taking off his coat and throwing the window up.

"Very pretty, and as amiable as can be, too," said Morris.

"That's a good thing; what time do we lunch, Morris?"

"Two o'clock, sir," said the servant.

"Ah, it is one now," said Lionel, looking at his watch. "I shall have time to dress and have ten minutes' walk to collect my faculties for an introduction to her ladyship, your mistress."

"Yes, sir," said Morris, depositing waistcoats and trousers, and hanging up coats and caps and swords in the ample wardrobe; "shall I ring for hot water, sir?"

"No, thank you, Morris; the news has made me hot. Never mind undoing that leather case."

"All right, sir," said Morris. "You are looking a good deal bronzed with the sun, but glad to see you so well. Anything else I can do, sir?"

"No, thank you, Morris," said Lionel, taking no notice of the servitor's remark about his brown face, but wondering how Arthur Phillips had taken his disappointment. "Somehow I never thought the poor fellow had the slightest chance of marrying Phœbe. Poor Arthur! Such a sentimental fellow, too, he was; it would almost break his heart I should think; I will hunt him up tomorrow. Fancy George, Earl Verner, my whimsical, apathetic, luxurious, moping brother, falling in love with that pretty face at Barton, and marrying it! Wonders will never cease! I suppose he must have seen her on one of his calls on Tallant about those humbugging shares. Some people believe in the exercise of a sort of electrical sympathy influencing friends at the longest distances. Did that worry me in India? A stroke of fate, I suspect, in the whole thing. Well, we shall see."

Thus rambled on the current of Lionel's thoughts as he washed and dressed and gave his toilette sundry extra touches in view of the new society which now graced the castle. What a terrible shock of disappointment and surprise awaited him! It seemed as though fortune were playing off some grim joke upon him.

As she passed through the principal drawing-room on her way to the library, the Countess saw her brother-in-law walking towards the lake. It was a fine manly figure, in a loose morning costume that set off the broad shoulders and the stalwart limbs to perfection. How she had loved that man! How she had listened for his footsteps and trembled at his voice! She dared not think of the past; she would not think of it, she would crush it out of memory. She clenched her fair white hand as she made the vow, clenched it in an agony of resolve until her fingers pained her; and she went in unto her husband crushing out that forbidden, that cruel memory!

"Well, my darling, have you seen the Indian?"

said his lordship, when the Countess entered the library. "I declare the fellow is as brown as a gipsy."

"I saw him from the window going towards the lake. There he is," she said, looking in that direction, "returning now."

As she said so, Morris knocked at the door and entered with Lord Cornington's card. He was walking in the picture gallery, and wished to see Lord Verner on particular business.

"I will come to him at once," said his lordship. "Excuse me for ten minutes, my dear; Cornington has called about the Darfield property; I have put him off too long already; I will return as quickly as possible."

In the hall Lord Verner met his brother, and the Countess could hear him say, "You will find my wife in the library, Lionel; your own introduction will be sufficient: amuse her with an account of your voyage until I return."

The next moment Lionel entered the room. Amy pressed her hand upon her heart and sum-

moned up all her courage and fortitude. He looked at her for a moment, and then with a sudden gleam of joy upon his face he rushed towards her. Amy stepped back a few paces and coldly extended her hand.

"Why, what is this, Amy?" said the Indian officer. "Surely some joke, some jest to increase my present happiness at sight of you."

"I do not understand you," said the Countess, in real astonishment; for she had dismissed from her mind the possibility of Lionel's ignorance of Mr. Tallant's death and the discovery of Mrs. Somerton's fraud.

"You are here to surprise me, to punish me for my neglect by a gracious condescension; you have forgiven me, but I am to suffer for leaving you so strangely. I see it all, dear, dear Amy."

"Sir, is this the language which you address to your brother's wife," said Amy, with a glow of indignation and alarm in her face.

"What do you mean? What is this? Pray be candid with me and forgive me. Surely the

jest has gone far enough; your looks alarm me," said Lionel, in a passion of appeal.

"There is no jest in this business," said Amy. "I fear you do not know all. Before Mr. Tallant died it was discovered that I, whom you knew as Amy Somerton, was his daughter, and that the lady you knew as Miss Tallant was, in truth, the bailiff's daughter. I was Christopher Tallant's heiress, and I am now your brother's wife, the Countess of Verner."

Lionel sunk into a chair and covered his face with his hands as Amy, in a clear, firm voice, spoke these words. And this was what he had come from India to learn. Was he in some hideous dream? He looked up only to be the more convinced that he was a victim to cruel fate.

"And now, Mr. Hammerton, if you ever loved Amy Somerton, respect her as your brother's wife; and if you value his happiness or mine, guard as a sacred secret the memory of that love which you once professed for her. Now is the time to prove the sincerity of a passion which

you once professed, and which was the joy of that poor girl, until neglect and indifference stepped between her and hope, and gave her hand to another. For my sake, for your own, for your brother's, leave this house as soon as possible; whilst you do remain, blot out that memory of the past—crush it out as I have crushed it—and never let Earl Verner's peace be disturbed even by a suspicion of anything more than a mere acquaintanceship between yourself and his wife. As you fulfil these my wishes, so shall I gauge your love."

She left him as she said this, and when he raised his head he looked for her in vain. The twin brothers in the "Comedy" were not in a greater maze of bewilderment than was Lionel Hammerton. Though the light broke in upon his mind during that cold resolute explanation, it seemed like an ugly dream. He was like a man paralysed by a sudden blow of misfortune, against which he struggled ineffectually. To fall from the sunniest height of anticipated bliss into a Stygian gulf of misery like this, was enough to unnerve a

stronger man than Lionel Hammerton. Pride, self-love, hope, fortune, happiness—all were struck down when most they should have flourished. It had flashed upon him, at first sight of Amy, that her friend, the Countess, had confessed all with regard to his (Lionel's) love, and that his generous brother had concocted a delightful plot to surprise him. But for Amy's fixed, cold look, he would have been at her feet imploring her forgiveness, and blessing her for coming there, that he might not lose a moment in asking her to be his wife. And now she had slipped from him for ever, and Fate mocked him with her as his sister-in-law! Was it true? Was there hope yet? He would go out and walk; there was virtue in fresh air. He took up his hat, and went forth into the old ruin; he clambered up the rotten stone steps, and stood upon the moss-grown battlements, where men-at-arms had defended the garrison hundreds of years before; he looked round upon the glorious scene, mellowed with a thousand tints of autumn; he watched the blue wreaths of smoke, mount-

ing up in tall ethereal colums from the old hall chimneys; he saw those purple hills in the distance, beyond which he first met Amy Somerton. Then he remembered the enumeration of her wishes so recently expressed—wishes that were a command to him—a command by the observance of which she would gauge his love.

"She shall have no reason to complain," he thought, as he came back again to the hall. "There may be some cruel plot of punishment for my neglect at the bottom of all this; it is a slight hope, a weak plank in the ocean of my disappointment, but I will cling to it for this day at least."

"Why did you run away?" said his lordship, when Lionel returned. "Did the Countess frighten you? We are waiting for luncheon. Cornington dines with us; he has just taken her ladyship in—come along, come along!"

And the brothers, arm-in-arm, entered the luncheon-room, where Lord Cornington was just handing Lady Verner to her seat.

The Countess never looked better than she did

this morning, and she led the conversation in her best manner; her racy, humorous repartee reminded the Earl of his first introduction to her at Barton Hall. Lord Cornington thought her one of the most brilliant women he had ever met. Lionel Hammerton watched her, and replied to her sallies now and then with undisguised astonishment. Lord Verner was delighted with his wife, proud of her wit, proud of her beauty, proud of himself that she was his wife.

None of them saw that weary, haggard look which Amy saw an hour afterwards in the glass, when she had retired to her room. She was a fine actress, and she knew it; but the effort now was a severe strain upon her nervous system. She had hoped until yesterday that she would not be called upon to act again for a long time to come. Gratitude and respect had been ripening into love for her husband; but she would never be herself so long as Lionel Hammerton remained. She was beset with fear and alarm; fear lest her husband should discover the love that had once existed

between herself and his brother; fear arising from her own conscience, burthened with the knowledge of the revenge she had sought and obtained; alarm lest she should fall in the estimation of her husband. This was the greatest fear of all; the idea of losing one jot of that love and admiration which he had lavished upon her, was torture. Her own fidelity and truth were safe; she never for a moment doubted her strength to maintain her own self-respect as Earl Verner's wife; but there was a wretched spell upon her, with Hammerton in the house, which made his presence a torment far greater than she could have dreamed of. All those first passionate feelings of triumph and revenge which had supported her during that time of Lord Verner's courtship, had vanished long since, and now she only prayed for peace.

When the soft mellow gong, which announced dinner, resounded through the halls and corridors of Montem Castle, Lord Verner, who had been sitting with his wife in her own room, brought an excuse for her absence. She was not at all well

this evening, he said, and so Lord Cornington and Lionel Hammerton and the Earl dined together, and Lord Cornington re-echoed Earl Verner's hope that her ladyship might come down to tea. Meanwhile Lady Verner wrote to her dear friend Phœbe, begging of her to come and stay a few days with her at Montem, and telling her that Arthur Phillips should have an invitation to dinner as long as her stay lasted.

CHAPTER VII.

CONTAINS A LETTER FROM A DEAR FRIEND, AND TAKES THE READER ONCE MORE TO SEVERNTOWN.

"My dear Amy," wrote Phœbe in reply to her friend's invitation, "your letter was indeed welcome, though the news it contained startled me not a little, and made me regret ever so much more my inability to respond to your *kind* and *sisterly* invitation. My poor mother is so unwell that I cannot possibly leave her at present. She is suffering from an attack of the same kind as that which prostrated her at Barton Hall. I hope she will be quite recovered in a day or two, and then I hope to come to you.

"Dearest Amy, I am sure you will not give way in the slightest with regard to that respect and love which is your noble husband's. The

trial has come earlier than you expected, but so much the better; it will be the sooner at an end; trials in anticipation are more grievous often than when they come upon us suddenly. The memory of your noble and religious vow in that London hotel when you and I were alone will support you, and God will help you to keep in the path of duty! I know what your only fear is; but you may rely upon his respecting your position and considering the happiness of his brother too much even to utter an incautious word that shall compel you to confess all. Should the worst come to the worst, my dear sister—and this is the worst—there will be no shame in an honest avowal of the past. Don't fear, my dear, dear Amy, *he* must have too acute a sense of his own neglect to make him otherwise than your true friend, and you will find him returning to India sooner than you expect.

"When mother has recovered I am to make arrangements for my marriage to my own dear Arthur. Of course you have seen how famous he

has become; he is taking the highest position in art that is attainable. Ere long he will stand at the highest point of success. He comes to us from Severntown every week.

"You will be surprised to receive this letter from Lincolnshire. That Oldhall farm of which my father used to talk so much is his, and we have removed thither now a month past—during the month of your honeymoon. We have left old Dorothy at Barton, and father is going to write to you about the tenancy. We are not far from the birthplace of Tennyson, your favourite poet. I don't think I like the country quite so well as Avonworth Valley; but it is a pleasure to see my father 'at home,' as it were, in his native county.

"I shall write again in a day or two. Meanwhile accept my most affectionate regards, and believe me to be

"Ever yours devotedly,

"PHŒBE."

"*Oldhall, Lincolnshire.*"

Amy was disappointed with this letter, but she had grown calmer since she had written to Phœbe; she had become more accustomed to the situation, and Lionel Hammerton's conduct had allayed her fears. He observed a studious courtesy towards her, and had not in the slightest alluded to the past by word or deed. It is true she gave him no opportunity, although he had certainly once made an effort to be alone with her in the grounds.

A succession of callers and visitors was of great assistance to the Earl's wife, and she encouraged his lordship to invite his country neighbours to dinner. On several days she had to receive presents from local manufacturers at Brazencrook—specimens of their wares specially manufactured for her. This gave her occupation, and her gracious manners speedily won for her a reputation of which she might well be proud. She was pronounced in Brazencrook to be the most beautiful and the least proud of any lady in the land, and the country people were enchanted with her

amiability and her sparkling conversational powers. The old vicar and his wife, who had never agreed about anything in their lives before, agreed that she was a charming woman, and all the district was singing her praises in less than a week.

Mrs. Somerton's health did not improve, and so Phœbe did not come to Amy's side, and Lionel Hammerton still remained at Barton Hall. A hundred times he had resolved to go, but he had resolved, as many times, to stay. By degrees Amy became more accustomed to his presence, though she had taken an opportunity, after a fortnight had elapsed, to hint that she was unhappy in his continued stay at Montem.

After this he went away to London for a month, preparatory to making final arrangements for his return to India; so he said. During this month Amy's life flowed on again smoothly amidst these new scenes; she received visits and returned visits; she had given a grand ball to the county families surrounding Montem Castle, and his lordship had given an *al fresco fête* to his tenantry. Never

had there been such gaiety at Montem Castle; never had the old place rejoiced in so gracious a mistress.

Meanwhile Lionel Hammerton led a life of excitement in London. Proud and weak, as the reader has seen, Earl Verner's brother could not overcome his terrible disappointment. He was mad with vexation, and he hated himself for losing the prize which had fallen so strangely to his brother's lot. That this woman had loved him with all her heart he now believed, and that she had married his brother out of pique or revenge he believed also. Why had he doubted her? That miserable thought about mercenary motives; he despised himself for harbouring it, and yet it was a plausible doubt, he confessed to himself. What should he do? Go to India again and for good, without returning to Montem. He would. There could be no good purpose served in seeing her again. It would be manly to depart now. He would do so. Thus he would resolve at night only to break his resolution in the morning, and

the end was a cab to Paddington and a ticket for Brazencrook. When Lionel had arrived at Severntown, however, he changed his mind again, got out, and drove to the College Green, where he found Arthur Phillips at work in his familiar studio.

"At last," said Arthur, reciprocating Lionel's hearty greeting, "at last; I feared you had forgotten your friend."

"No chance of that," said Lionel; "your name is in everybody's mouth, and I have seen your great picture 'now on view.'"

"In England all this time, and not even a letter from you!" said Arthur.

"I meant to have looked you up the first day after my arrival,—I did indeed, but at the time I thought you miserable."

"Miserable!" said the artist with some astonishment.

"Yes; but it was I all the time who had reason for sympathy."

"Let me ring the bell," said Arthur. "There! Now go on."

A man-servant answering the bell, the artist said, "Take Captain Hammerton's portmanteau into the blue room."

"Yes, sir," said the man.

"Of course you will make a short stay here," said Arthur, once more addressing his friend.

"I will not leave you to-day at any rate," said Lionel. "May I smoke?"

"Of course you may," said Arthur, opening the old cupboard by the fireplace and producing cigars and lights.

"How familiar the old room looks," said Lionel. "You have made no change here."

"No," said Arthur; "none was required."

"*You* are changed, Arthur—changed for the better. You seem to have lost some of your quiet dreamy nature. There is more animation in your step and in your voice. How well you look!"

"Yes, thank God, I am well," said Arthur.

"Success in all things—success in your profession—success in love," said Lionel; "you

should look well and happy. By heavens, Arthur, I envy you!"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, and said no man could judge another's happiness sufficiently to justify envy.

"A sop to Cerberus that," said Lionel. "You wish to discount your own happiness that my misery may appear the less. It won't do, Arthur. But never mind, I have not come here to croak. I have heard of your success, of your happy prospects, even in London, and I congratulate you. You have deserved success; you deserve happiness. If I had listened to you before I left England, I too might have been a happy man. As it is, I am the sport of cruel Fortune, a broken-spirited, weak fool, only fit for the society of idiots."

"Tush, tush! talk rationally, my friend; we have all our troubles and disappointments," said Arthur. "You will soon get over this. Change of scene, the performance of duty, will stand you in good stead, and help you to look upon the past indifferently."

"I fear me not, Arthur; I am dead beat. I came over to England for nothing in the world else but to marry that girl; to throw myself at her feet, and ask her to have mercy on me. In the meantime, as if the devil himself had plotted against me, everything is changed—even the woman herself. Fortune has been playing a game of 'swop,' and the woman whom I could have married meets me as my brother's wife."

"The changes have been very remarkable—very," said Arthur, altogether at a loss how to say anything in the way of consolation.

"Remarkable! Good Lord! why, the world is turned topsy-turvy. *You* have come right, Arthur, that's one comfort, and it is my own fault that I stand where I do. Does she love my brother? How came it all about? Was it revenge? Tell me all you know, Arthur: it is some relief to talk about one's misfortunes."

Arthur complied so far as he could with this request, telling Lionel the story of the eventful period between his departure and return. They

sat talking together until evening approached, and then went in to dinner, Lionel finding comfort in his friend's kindly considerate words and advice.

At night they walked forth together by the river. Lionel grew calm in presence of the great swollen torrent, and listened to Arthur's story of his own life and its troubles, and of his plans for the future. They talked of Phœbe too, and of Arthur's years of patient hope. Lionel laughed aloud with joy at the story of Richard Tallant's discomfiture.

"I always hated that fellow," said Lionel, in his loud emphatic way; "he was a thief."

"He had not too high a sense of honour, I fear," said Arthur.

"He was a thief when I knew him," said Lionel still more emphatically, "and the confederate of that ruffian Gibbs. What a fine old fellow, that father of his, to disinherit the vagabond!"

"It was a great blow to him, though he prospers still," said Arthur.

"And I might have had some of the beggar's money," said Lionel, "had I married his sister. By heavens! I would have pitched it into the river!"

"He does not want money, they say," Arthur went on. "His losses have been great lately, but he talks of going into parliament. In fact he has selected my native town for the honour of his candidature."

"Happy coincidence! Severntown was to have supplied me with a seat in the house, if I had not been fool enough to run my head into that Ashford Club den, and consented to soil my fingers with their filthy Stock-exchange ventures. Upon my soul it is time I disappeared from the land altogether."

Lionel strode on as if he were keeping pace with his thoughts, and intended to stride out of the land at once, and then he broke out into a loud ironical laugh as he said,—

"Fancy anybody contesting a seat with a scoundrel like that fellow Tallant; and yet Amy is his sister, and my sister-in-law. We must all have been eating of the insane root, Arthur."

"Fact is stranger than fiction," said the artist.

"Fiction! Fiction halts miles behind the ordinary facts of daily life. What is this fellow then?"

"A great financier, I suppose they would call him: his chief position is that of managing director of the Meter Iron Works Company, which his father founded,—one of the richest corporations in the land, I believe."

They little thought that Mr. Richard Tallant was really in serious difficulties at this very time. Whilst others of his class had been content to make large fortunes and retire, Mr. Richard Tallant had gone on playing for higher stakes. Men who had no money to begin with, had succeeded in humbugging the public out of thousands; and others who commenced cautiously and equally unscrupulously with thousands, had retired upon magnificent fortunes. Richard Tallant might have been amongst the latter had he been less covetous; and now he stood in imminent peril of losing nearly all: nothing but timely aid could save him.

CHAPTER VIII.

PORTENDS A DEED OF VENGEANCE.

The difficulty of getting up the evidence to support a charge of conspiracy, in the absence of Mr. Williamson, and Lieutenant Somerton's unwillingness to prosecute, saved Gibbs from one of the perils which threatened him; and the other case which Mr. Bales had against him also fell through. But the ex-swell was reminded by the Court that he had had a narrow escape, and that his escape was rather owing to a technicality in the law than to any doubt of his guilt.

Gibbs had been falling lower and lower, as our readers will have seen, since the night of his expulsion from the Ashford Club. Now and then Fortune's lamp had blazed up for a moment, but only to flicker down again, and tempt him into

lower depths of degradation. From bad to worse, from fashionable gambling to swindling, from cheating at cards to forgery, Gibbs had run the gauntlet of vice and immorality. From a Stock-exchange bear to a money-lender's cad; from an advertising sharper to a begging-letter writer; from haunting clubs to frequenting hotels; from hotels to taverns; from taverns to gin-shops; from gin-shops to the lowest night-houses, Shuffleton Gibbs had become a mean, shabby, out-of-elbows, unshaven outcast of society, who had twice been within a gaol, and seemed likely to die in the gutter.

There is no exaggeration in this rapid downward career—it is a common occurrence. We are not romancing, we are not sermonising, we do not believe in the Maine Law, we have no sympathy with trumpet-and-drum teetotal demagogues; but we are none the less sure in our belief that the first step aside from the straight path, unless at once retraced, will lead to misery if not to ruin, and that the man or woman who descends to "neat gin" is beyond human redemption. There is hope in beer,

in wine, even in brandy; but the gin drinker swallows a devilish elixir that destroys him body and soul. There is something heroic in brandy, something noble, the smack of the grape is there, the origin of the liquor has a glory in it; in gin there is debasement; the juniper berry has no classic history; who does not shudder, too, at the compound which the habitual gin tippler consumes—the fumetacious spirit, imbued with turpentine? Ugh! Whilst brandy fires the soul of the hero, the gin of the London stew stimulates the morbid passions of the thief and the murderer!

Shuffleton Gibbs had come down to gin and fog, to gin and darkness, to gin and the reeking night air; he was the habitué of the lowest night-houses, a shivering miserable wretch, and all the more dangerous to the man whom he hated with the low grovelling murderous hate of raw gin and poverty.

We have told the reader how Gibbs had applied for assistance to his early friend, Richard Tallant, and how he had been discarded and disowned. He made another effort still, a last effort, the effort of

a miserable hungry beggar, in whose heart every spark of pride and honour has been drowned in juniper juice and turpentine.

"I have done with you, sir," said the managing director of the Meter Works, "you are an impostor; I never saw you before."

"Not at Oxford," said the shivering beggar, "not when somebody wrote an epigram on the name of Tallant?"

"Never! This will be my answer always."

"Not at Westminster, at the Ashford, at Madame ——"

"Never, sir!" exclaimed Richard, stopping Gibbs in his enumeration of the places on the highway of infamy where they had supped together. "I once knew a scoundrel who led astray a wealthy merchant's son and broke the father's heart; you are something like that aristocratic sneak, but you are not he. The man I mean was a swell, wore light kid gloves, and splendid shirts. They did say he wore stays, and thought himself a woman killer; *you* are not that man, but some blear-

eyed, shambling vagabond who would impose upon a gentleman in order that he may give you a night's lodging in the station house."

"You infernal damned scoundrel," said Gibbs, rushing towards the cool satirical friend of former days; "you miserable mushroom huxter!"

Richard Tallant was by far the strongest man of the two, and he felled Gibbs to the ground with ease.

"Now, shall I ring the bell and have you pitched into the street, or will you get up and go home to dinner, or go to your club and have devilled chops and champagne—eh?"

Gibbs gathered himself together and stood before his victor, clenching his hands and teeth, and trembling with passion.

"I will go," he said, hissing out the words as if they scorched him. "The cat will mew; the dog will have his day."

Mr. Tallant rang the bell. A servant came on the instant.

"Show this fellow to the door; if ever he pre-

sumes to make his appearance here again thrust him into the street and give him in charge of the police."

"Yes, sir," said the man, "this way."

Gibbs followed his guide muttering, and nervously clutching his fingers.

"Now then, old ragamuffin," said the servant when they were in the hall, "hoff yer go."

Hunger, as Zimmermann says, is the mother of impatience and anger, and never had mother a more worthy son than Shuffleton Gibbs. It was hunger which had driven him to make that third application to his friend; hunger and thirst; hunger for money as much as hunger for food. He had neither money nor credit, even in the stews, where he had exhausted both, when he made this last appeal to Richard Tallant. But he got money somehow that night, and he swore an awful oath that he would wreak a terrible revenge on the head of this vile scoundrel. The red-eyed, low-browed, crouching gin drinkers who sat with him at the midnight orgie—even they noticed the satanic malignity of Gibbs's countenance, as it worked and writhed under a passion

too deep for words; they knew that, whatever it might import, that awful oath would not be broken. They fairly clanked their glasses and knocked their skinny knuckles upon the table to see Gibbs so much excited, and the women, with witch-like grimaces, pledged his "health" and wished him "luck."

There is generally a weak point somewhere in the schemes of men who set right and virtue at naught, and who endeavour to build up wealth and fame upon false pretences. Religious sceptics will direct your attention to instances of undeserved poverty and sufferings borne through a whole lifetime; will show you persons dragging out wretched lives of penury and want, and prove to you that they are good, honest, honourable people. As companion pictures, they will show you men of wealth and station living luxuriously, and rejoicing in the highest state of worldly happiness. And then they ask you what sort of a sermon or essay you can write upon the text, "God is love." But the sceptic-critic has little

or nothing to say about real happiness, and how that is divided amongst the human family. If he had, perhaps he might puzzle a good many by pointing to the colliery districts, the factories, or the nail country, and showing you the hard, bitter life to which thousands of children are born daily. What a blessed thing to some of these people is the future, founded on true Christian faith! But our critic of the ways of Providence does not tell you of the miseries of keeping up appearances which are behind some of those marks of wealth; and he does not tell you how scores of the prosperous ones to whom he points come to grief at last, as they deserve. He fixes them before you in their full career of success, but he does not show you their disappointed hopes, their unfulfilled ambition, their social cuts and wounds, the grievances of their women, the social failures of their sons and daughters; and, what is more, he does not show you the end of the men whom he holds up as prosperous, happy, luxurious, revelling, wealthy villains.

Depend upon it, men such as Richard Tallant, who have trampled upon honour and honesty, and above all, upon parental kindness (however mistaken that kindness may have been), are punished in this world below, whatever may be their lot in that which is to come.

The weakest point in Richard Tallant's policy was the want of a course of conciliation towards Shuffleton Gibbs. Fate would, no doubt, have met him with a just retribution in some other way had he escaped the result of this mistake; but it is no part of our business to consider what might have been, we who are considering the facts of Richard Tallant's career; and as it has not been our purpose to be mysterious in this simple narration, we do not hesitate to tell you that Richard Tallant sealed his destiny when he resealed that letter of his former companion,—the last abandoned representative of a fallen line of gentlemen.

He little knew how often he was accompanied after this by a shadow more than his own. Once or twice, thinking he was being watched, he

had turned round suddenly in the London streets to see a figure disappear as suddenly in some dark entry, or round an adjacent corner. He thought this was fancy at first; but finally beginning to fear, he armed himself. He had never thought of Shuffleton Gibbs at these times. A superstitious dread took possession of him at the outset, thoughts of his dead father haunted him, and occasionally sent him home hot, and feverish, and nervous. Latterly he rarely went out on foot; but still a mysterious figure occasionally flitted by as he alighted from his carriage. Sometimes it seemed as if an arm were upraised. That same figure would stand now and then in front of the great house where Mr. Tallant resided, and contemplate the lighted windows, and then disappear by crooked unfrequented ways, up dark alleys, along neglected streets, away city-wards, until it entered a dirty gin-shop or some wretched lodging-house, where it would assume the appearance of Shuffleton Gibbs, but sufficiently changed in feature to render disguise unnecessary.

Weird, restless, sunken eyes, sharp features, a nervous twitching of the mouth, and a continual watchfulness, like that of a man charged with some desperate mission of blood; it was a miserable wreck tossed about on the dark sea of criminal London without sail or rudder, bound for no port, without a name, without papers; and yet with a compass pointing its trembling finger unerringly in one direction, where the signal lights burnt red and murky on a dark and dreadful shore.

CHAPTER IX.

GLANCES AT WILLIAMSON'S STORY, AND TERMINATES PAUL SOMERTON'S ADVENTURE.

It came at last, that story of Williamson's life; it came in a heavy letter franked with foreign postage-stamps; and Paul Somerton read it with hot curiosity.

There was nothing particularly new or startling in the narration. It was the old old story of sin and sorrow, with perhaps darker hues of melancholy in it, here and there, than usual.

During his University career, at a very early age, Williamson had been attracted by the wild beauty of a woman who was the daughter of an adventurer—a man without principle—seeking in a son-in-law an annuity for himself, as well as a husband for his child. Williamson related by

what mean and mercenary arts this man of the world had lured him on, and how the daughter had shared with her father in the shameful plot. A long, long story of love, and doubt, and fear, and unholy passion;—of mad, blind love, and desperate resolves; of a clandestine marriage, and exposure; of a widowed mother's death; of a son's sorrow embittered by his wife's ingratitude, and a father-in-law's impecunious and drunken habits. A long, long story of woe and violence; of a brave man's struggle against the miseries of a worse than unloving wife, and a wretched home, in the midst of comparative wealth.

Soon there appeared on the scene an infant with bright eyes, and a young doating father seeking comfort in its innocent loving ways, in its happy smile, and its first words. But this gleam of sunshine quickly disappeared, and then there came clouds again, darker and darker; and, finally, there stood forth in the immoral darkness a husband's shame, a wife's infidelity, a father's miserable death from drink.

Paul shuddered as he traced out the dreary story with the writer's special notes and comments, intended to apply to Paul's own position and act as awful warnings.

Then at length the husband was alone. The wife had fled with a *cher ami* of former days. Her child disappeared, too. She knew that the infant would have been a source of consolation to the forlorn and broken man; hence her fiendish vow that he should see it no more. The wrongs which she had heaped upon him induced all this fierce hatred and malice; and, finally, Williamson was alone in the world with his sorrows.

Years passed away, and he heard a strange story of the death of his wife in connection with a travelling theatre or circus. The name of a celebrated comedian, who had by misconduct been reduced to the booth and the fair, was mixed up with the event in some way; but Williamson could never clear the story up satisfactorily, and all his efforts to obtain tidings of his child proved ineffectual.

How he had lived since those terrible days of his early life his friends knew; that there was a dark shadow upon his history they knew also; but of the misery and despair, the blighted career, the hopes destroyed, the opportunities misapplied, the broken-down ambition, the aching heart, they knew nothing.

And this woman—this wife of Shuffleton Gibbs—this scheming, unscrupulous woman, was his child! That Paul Somerton should never see her again would be her father's chief care; his next, a life-long effort to redeem her from herself, to straighten the crooked mind, to win back to the darkened conscience some faint light at least of purity and truth—to combat with the inborn devil, that some essence of the angel might still revive within that human soul.

And then the writer grew eloquent upon wonderful cases of conversion from the lowest depths of sin to paths of virtue; the faith of the true Christian broke out in burning words, and here and there expressions of parental hope in the future.

But so far as Paul was concerned, he was reminded in firm, but kindly words, that there stood between him and this woman marriage vows plighted to another, and the claims of a long suffering father pledged to a great and holy work of religious duty. Some day, ere the deep shadows of the future closed upon them all for ever, and there was an end of passion and repentance, they might meet again, but for the present their paths in the great world lay in different directions.

Wearied and unhappy, Lieutenant Somerton lay down on his bed that night when he received this letter. The next morning he woke with a sense of pain and weakness. For days after this he was delirious. His constant attendant during this time was his gentle sister Phœbe, who came to town with her father on a special summons from the young officer's medical attendant.

Though in point of time we anticipate slightly some of the events of the next few chapters, we think it well to finish Paul's "first love" adventure in this place. We take the liberty, there-

fore, to say that when he had sufficiently recovered his father took him down into Lincolnshire, and in course of time, amidst the bracing air of wolds and fens, health and strength came back to him. What a quiet, dreary time it was these few months, in the heart of the great agricultural district! Sluggish rivers, with sedgy banks; long hard roads; low trim hedges; sleek, short-horned cattle; big hay-ricks and straw stacks—how familiar they became! Then there was an occasional ride to the hounds, visits to the local markets, unsophisticated evening parties, and all the other rural pleasures of the place.

Paul felt happy in the society of his new sister, as he called her—the happiness of an aspiring mind in the presence of its superior; and Arthur Phillips, with his grand thoughts and his quiet manner, was a welcome guest at the old Lincolnshire house. Mrs. Somerton was not a happy woman, though she evidently made a constant effort to appear so; but Luke was full of life and spirits. He was the leading man of the district, and rapidly

becoming the most popular. It was like reading a book, his Lincolnshire friends said, to hear him talk about farming, and the newspapers reported his speeches in full when he presided at the District Agricultural Society.

After a time the Lieutenant rejoined his regiment, and left England for the Cape of Good Hope, a wiser and a better, though not a happier, man, for his adventure with the barrister's mysterious daughter. He kept his secret all the time in the Lincolnshire fens and marshes, and carried it with him to Kaffir-land. May we hope to hear of him before our story closes, that he found consolation in the love of some other woman more worthy his devotion. The lacerations of young hearts often heal with astonishing rapidity.

CHAPTER X.

"FROM GRAVE TO GAY."

Joy and grief, how they alternate! What a busy, sorrowing, cheerful, merry, sad, wicked, virtuous world it is! Births, marriages, and deaths! —a text for all preachers—a safe guide for novelist and story teller. Births, marriages, and deaths! The same story every day told by every newspaper. What then can a true history of life be but a story of births, marriages, and deaths?

Unroof yon street, friend Asmodeo, and let the reader judge for himself. Here a child is born; there a bridegroom has just brought home his newly-married wife; yonder lies a dead man with sorrow weeping by his side. Carry us away to that village in the soft, sunny country. The same story still. Births, marriages, and deaths—joy

and grief alternating! What bells are those that ring so merrily? What bell is that which groans, and sobs, and wails?

Thank goodness, the merry bells are for our ears in this chapter. The sound comes from a great square tower, that stands up like a beacon in the Lincolnshire cornfields. The clash and clang of the bells comes rushing out through the belfry apertures into the clear air amongst the rooks and the swallows. The dead who lie beneath those gaunt, crumbling, half-buried grave-stones, hear them not, though they rung out joyously at their marriages. The hard, grimy faces in the church porch, and the cherubims that ornament the water-spouts, hear the bells now quite as well as the men and women who passed them by on their way to the altar years and years ago. You would think the birds heard the melody and rejoiced in it; they chirruped, and sung, and flitted to and fro with a gaiety which they rarely exhibit in autumn days; for they knew the year was coming to an end, and that the north wind cometh after harvest.

That ancient sluggish river, which had been red in olden times with the blood of the last Saxon warriors, let the bell-music rest upon its bright bosom in which the clouds mimicked each other, and hid themselves amongst spikes of waving rushes and green water flags.

They were ringing, these Lincolnshire bells, in celebration of the marriage of Arthur Phillips and Phœbe Somerton, who had walked arm in arm to church to be married, unattended save by Luke Somerton and Paul, and their own true love. It was Arthur's wish that it should be so; and nobody but those most intimately concerned knew of the marriage until the bells, big with the secret, burst their iron bonds, and gave birth to that joyous melody.

And whilst they were ringing out their blithe and hopeful song, the Earl and Countess of Verner were discussing the happy event at Montem Castle, walking by the side of that sunny lake in the park.

"The news comes so suddenly," said her ladyship, "that it is almost tantalising."

"What a sly little fox it is," said his lordship.

"I have pressed her upon the subject several times, but unsuccessfully. Never mind, I will be even with her. It has been in my mind very often to tell you of my idea of a wedding present for these dear friends of ours."

"Yes, yes," said his lordship; "what is it, dearest?"

"Oh, something so dreadfully expensive," said the Countess; "something almost unheard of as a wedding present."

"You excite my curiosity," said his lordship, gaily.

"It is something belonging to you—a gift in your own possession."

"Our pictures?" said his lordship, eagerly.

"No, my love."

"Our pottery, our books, our jewels?" said his lordship, tossing a stone into the lake for the amusement of a water spaniel.

"No; I fear you cannot guess," said Amy.

"Then I will give it up at once: whatever it

be, Amy, it is yours to bestow upon bride or bridegroom," said his lordship.

"Thank you, my dear George; how good you are," said the Countess.

"Not half good enough to have such a dear, dear wife as you, Amy," said the loving old lord. "And now what is it?"

"The Barton Hall Estate," said Amy, triumphantly. "The house where Phœbe was born, where she lived, and which was really her home, the fields in which she walked, the rocks and trees which her husband loved to paint, the place where Phœbe and your Amy lived and loved together."

"Good, good!" said the Earl.

"You consent?" asked Amy, joyfully.

"Certainly," said his lordship, "with all the pleasure in life; you never doubted it. Besides, the estate is your own, Amy."

"My dear love," said the Countess, a warm affectionate smile lighting up her beautiful face; but her countenance fell immediately, as Lionel Hammerton emerged from a thicket close by.

"Oh! Lionel, going for a ramble?" said the Earl.

"Yes," said Lionel, raising his hat to the Countess, "the weather is so tempting, and my time down here so short."

"Indeed; when do you leave us then?" asked the Earl.

"Next month," said Hammerton.

"Thank God!" said the Countess in her heart.

"Your friend the artist is married to-day," said the Earl; "a quiet wedding all to themselves, and a secret."

"I understood it was to be so," said Hammerton. "I hope they will be happy."

"As happy as two other friends of yours," said his lordship, merrily.

"Happier, if that were possible," said Lionel.

"But it is not possible," said his lordship. "Is it Amy?"

"I think not," said Amy, casting a side-glance of defiance at Lionel. "When two people marry, happiness comes to them in a hundred different ways."

"What do you think her ladyship's wedding present is to be?" his lordship asked.

"Diamonds and pearls, and bracelets of gold, and rubies," said Lionel. "Her ladyship has good choice of jewelry and things that are costly."

Amy could understand the covert sarcasm of Lionel's reply, but his lordship laughed and said:

"I knew you could not guess. I tried much more likely presents than those, without avail. Guess again."

"Books of poems bound in gold, full of legends of love and constancy."

"No—you'll never guess. What do you think of the Barton Hall Estate for a wedding present?"

Lionel hesitated and looked at Amy, who had taken her husband's arm and was walking quietly by his side.

"I am not joking. What do you think of a woman who presents to her friend Barton Hall, and the lands surrounding it, chiefly on account of the dear associations connected with it, and all that sort of thing?"

"Why, that she is a truly noble woman, and worthy to be the wife of Earl Verner," said Hammerton, with genuine enthusiasm.

"Thank you, brother—thank you," said the Countess, with tears in her eyes, and something of the tender expression of those past days which Lionel was honestly trying to blot out for ever.

"Why, my darling, there are tears in your eyes," said his lordship.

"Tears of joy and gratitude," said Amy; "gratitude for your kindness, and joy that your brother thinks me worthy to be your wife."

Earl Verner hardly knew what to make of this little outburst of feeling; but he loved his wife all the more for her generosity to her friend, and said he hoped Lionel had never doubted that his wife was equal to any previous Countess of Verner.

"Never," your lordship; "and this act of gracious consideration for her friend, this sanctifying of the past, if I may use so strong a phrase, by the gift of Barton Hall to Arthur Phillips and his wife, is a crowning act of grace which has

no parallel in the history of the ladies of our house."

Earl Verner did not see that there was quite so much in it as Lionel would make out; but he had never doubted his wife's generosity, and Lionel had. There was a peculiar graciousness in the gift which would especially commend itself to one who knew more intimately than Earl Verner did, the early history of his true and faithful wife.

CHAPTER XI.

EXPLANATIONS THAT CAME TOO LATE.

"I HAVE many times endeavoured to converse with you alone; you have studiously prevented this until now," said Lionel Hammerton, addressing the Countess, as she sat at the piano the morning after their meeting by the lake.

Lord Verner was in the library, indulging in his morning's devotion at the shrine of his favourite author.

"I feared you until yesterday; I fear you no longer, because your sympathies have at last been awakened in my favour," said Amy.

"I thought you mercenary — let me confess it—I thought you worldly and selfish; that you had married not only for revenge, but for riches."

"You are pleased to be candid," said Amy, a little indignantly.

"Not to wound you, any more than myself; for I loved you with all my soul——"

"I must not listen to you if you talk of love," said Amy, interrupting him.

"You must, you shall," said Lionel, firmly. "It will be the last time."

"Have I deserved your reproaches?" said Amy, looking straight into his eyes. "You, who deserted and neglected the woman whom you professed to love,—deserted her because of her lowly birth,—did you think there was no pride as well as humility in love? How did you mention my name to your artist friend when you left England without even saying farewell to me?"

"What did I say to Phillips?"

"Yes, I asked him. It was the last straw to which I clung."

Lionel remembered his parting conversation with Arthur.

"What did he say?"

"He would not tell me how you had spoken of me. This was when I was rich, Lionel, an heiress, possessed of fortune—aye, and of modest rank too. I pressed him. He confessed you had spoken of me. 'Did he speak of me as you would wish to have heard your sister spoken of by the man whom she loved?' I asked him."

"And what was his reply?"

"He said 'No;' and from that moment I renounced you and your false love. I had only been in a whirl of jealousy and pride before."

"He said truly—Arthur Phillips said truly; but O, I loved you then, Amy, loved you still in my heart; and when I returned to England, ignorant of all the changes which had taken place, I came to throw myself at your feet."

Amy trembled as he spoke, trembled at the thoughts of the happiness there would have been in this; but respect for herself, gratitude to her lord, womanly, wifely pride stepped in and restored her former self-command.

"And what *did* you say then to Arthur Phillips?" asked the Countess.

"I thought you cared more for my position, for my presumed wealth and prospects, than for myself alone," said Lionel. "Why did you interfere in my private affairs? why make those inquiries concerning my relationship with Richard Tallant, or my doings at the Ashford Club?"

"It brooks little now how much I loved you, Lionel; and an explanation of my motives can do no good, seeing that neither of us can restore the past; but Heaven knows I grieved that your station was so much higher than that of the girl who loved you so well. And still I could not bear to see you fall, to hear of your noble nature lowering itself to the level of the base and the mean, to have it sullied by contact with gamblers, and——"

"There was no thought of self in this? no jealous watching over my expenditure? no worldly speculations of the future?" said Lionel, hurriedly interrupting her.

"For shame!" exclaimed the Countess, rising;

"for shame! If this is how you interpreted my weak conduct—if this is how you estimated the homage of my poor girlish heart—thank God, Lionel Hammerton, you and I *are* parted for ever! Had my love been blessed with your acceptance, this discovery would have been like a curse upon it—it would have broken my heart."

Lionel bowed his head before this storm of womanly indignation.

"Never talk of love again, Lionel, unless you can believe that woman's love has nothing of self in it; that it is above the world almost as much as the angels are; that it is self-sacrificing, meek, lowly—content to be trodden upon by the living idol which it sets up for worship. *This* is *true* woman's love: in my love for you there was, indeed, the worldly leaven of pride; the inborn spirit of my race, I suppose. But for this I should have sunk under your neglect and withered and died. With pride came the desire for revenge; and the love that was scorned and neglected, I plucked it out of my heart, trampled upon it as

you had done, and in its place, Lionel, I planted Ambition. As fate would have it, your brother came in my way, and I am his wife. I have sworn to honour, love and obey him, and I *will* to the end. His kindness, his devotion, have already made me deeply grateful to him; and love, the love of devoted friendship—not that passionate love of past days, but constant considerate love—will come with time. And now you know all my secret."

"You can never forgive me," said Lionel; "I can never forgive myself."

"Just now I thought I could not, but I can forgive you, Lionel: I do with all my heart. Do you forgive me? I ought to have waited—I know all that meek and lowly love should have done—but my soul was on fire with my wrongs, my hopes were all cast to the winds; my mother, or rather Mrs. Somerton, taunted me with my folly, and I scarcely knew what I did."

"God bless you, Amy!—if there be aught to forgive, I forgive you freely. I was anxious that

we should both understand each other; that there should be a mutual explanation, a reconciliation, Amy—a restoration of some little of that old love in which we may pray for each other as brother and as sister."

Amy gave Lionel her hand, as the tears coursed down her cheeks: he took the fair white fingers and pressed them to his lips; and just at that moment a face peered in at the window. It was Richard Tallant; he had come down to Brazencrook, left his luggage at the hotel, and walked over to Montem Castle, smoking a cigar, and revolving his position and prospects in his mind. He had come over to see the Countess on business; he wanted a large advance of money, or some security which would enable him to raise funds. He was in what commercial men call a "cleft stick," and he would speedily be what they call, in equally significant language, "up a tree." Not content with a moderate fortune, he had continued his course of speculation, and the tide had turned against him. The bills which he had unwarrantably kept afloat in

connection with the Meter-works had been mostly "done" by a discount house which had suddenly failed, and there were large payments to meet without delay. A bank, of which he was a director, grew suspicious of his transactions, and he was called upon by his colleagues to put his accounts straight. Another bank, where he had deposited his meter shares, suffered from so great a pressure that the manager was compelled to threaten that in two days those shares would be sent into the market for sale. Therefore, without some immediate and extraneous aid, he was a ruined man.

In this fix he determined to seek the assistance of his sister. He had compelled her to help him before, and, what was more, to invite his co-operation in that famous marriage ceremony. He had paid a formal visit to Montem since then, and had not received any further encouragement for keeping up the family connection. But he felt that he had a hold upon the Countess; if she would pay for her secret once, she would pay twice—and she should.

"The ill-mannerly fellow," said Lionel, as he caught a glimpse of the face in the window.

"It is my brother Richard," said Amy; "what can he possibly have come here for, without announcement, and evidently on foot, from Brazencrook?"

Lionel left her, and the next moment Richard Tallant sent in his card.

Her ladyship's reply was, that she was indisposed, and would not be able to see Mr. Tallant at present. He would find Lord Verner in the library.

"Thank you," was Richard's reply. "I will take a little walk, and return shortly. I will not disturb his lordship."

Meanwhile the Countess sought her room, and Lionel called old Morris to pack his trunks that he might leave for London by the morning mail. He felt that it was now really time he should leave Montem Castle for good.

The Countess did not put in an appearance until dinner-time, and she was surprised to find her brother dressed and waiting to conduct her to her seat.

"Lionel has ridden Hector into Brazencrook," said his lordship; "he fancies that he must make certain inquiries himself concerning the trains; he finds that it will be necessary for him to be in London to-morrow. It has suddenly occurred to him that he must really get back to India. Queer fellow, Mr. Tallant, my brother."

"So it would appear," Mr. Tallant replied.

"And you are a queer fellow too! Imagine, my love, he had left his luggage at the Verner Arms in Brazencrook, and declined my invitation to dinner. Of course I ordered his luggage to be sent for immediately."

His lordship had done this, not because he had any particular regard for Mr. Tallant, but simply in the hope of pleasing his wife; for, truth to tell, the Earl disliked this fellow, who had been a source of so much sorrow to that poor old man, his father.

The dinner was a dull affair, despite Lord Verner's efforts to make it cheerful. The Countess complained of headache. Mr. Richard Tallant

would talk of nothing but money and finance, of foreign bonds and national liabilities, and great houses which were at that moment experiencing the pressure of the panic more than they had felt it when the storm was at its height.

Lord Verner thought politics almost as dull a theme as finance; but he was more at home when Mr. Tallant spoke of the probability of a Government crisis, and Lady Verner found that she, too, could say something about Whigs and Tories, Liberals and Radicals; and so by the time the last course was removed a conversation had been started and maintained in which Mr. Tallant did not monopolise all the talking.

Lady Verner rose to leave the room much earlier than usual at dessert, and tea was announced before the two gentlemen had well tasted the Earl's choice old port.

"Her ladyship is early to-night," said Lord Verner. "I suppose she is anxious that we shall come into her dominions as soon as possible."

"Perhaps her ladyship fears you may become a

financier, if I am honoured with your society too long over wine," said Mr. Tallant.

"No fear of that," replied Lord Verner. "Hammerton induced me to invest in some new companies, and I don't think it at all likely that I shall make such another mistake."

"There are peers of the realm, and cabinet ministers too, bishops also, who have thought it quite legitimate to do a little in finance lately," said Mr. Tallant; "your lordship might do worse than be at the head of some gigantic company."

"You think so?" said Lord Verner.

"I do indeed; rank and fortune, the highest aristocracy in the land, have not thought it *infra dig.* to take part in promoting the commercial prosperity of their country."

"Gigantic companies seem to be gigantic humbugs just now, Mr. Tallant, and I assure you that is not in my line; and so we will in to tea—Lady Verner does not like to be kept waiting."

From the grand old oak dining-room, with its black polished wainscoting, its great black elabo-

rate sideboard and antique chairs, into an adjacent drawing-room, was quite a little walk over Turkey carpets and soft fluffy mats. The tall flunkeys in attendance were a splendid match both in manner and matter; and, however much Mr. Richard Tallant might ape this sort of thing at Kensington Palace Gardens, he could not help feeling that he was in presence of the real thing here. There was no veneering at Montem Castle, no attempt at display, none of that demonstrative show with which Plebeian Upstartism impresses you. Whatever there was at Montem Castle struck you with its reality, even to the form and ceremony. It was not put on for special occasions. The inmates were used to it. The best of everything was for my lord and lady, and the guests came in for their share of the best. There were certainly in the castle grand plate services for state occasions, when numbers were the chief consideration of cook and butler; but the grandeur of Montem Castle one day was the same as the next, and Mr. Tallant felt that this was the great difference between his place

at Kensington Palace Gardens and the magnificent realities of Montem.

The drawing-room in which the Countess awaited her husband and brother was the smallest of the two drawing-rooms—an exquisitely furnished room in which pale green and pale gold predominated in colour. The walls were enriched with delicate water-colour sketches, and there were dainty vases and statuettes here and there. Pale green curtains hung in massive folds beside each window, and the cornices above were floral designs in white and gold. Mirrors between each window reflected the pictures and the vases and the cabinets over and over again, and the great chimney-glass carried facsimiles of the chandeliers far away as though you were looking down a long vista, until the hundreds of wax candles flickered like stars in the distance.

The blinds were not drawn, and one of the windows looking out upon the terrace was open; for it was twilight and unusually hot, and the harvest moon was just rising.

The Countess, in a low evening dress, and wearing the diamond necklace which his lordship gave her on her marriage, was sitting near a tray of silver service, and one of those said matched servitors handed to the Earl and Mr. Tallant tea and coffee, whichever they desired.

In a short time Mr. Tallant said he should be compelled to return to town in the morning, and he would like to have a little conversation with her ladyship on some family matters that would not interest Lord Verner. As it was such a charming evening, might he suggest a walk on the terrace.

"By all means, if Amy would like it; I think it would do you good, my love. Lionel will be here presently, and he and I can chat whilst Mr. Tallant is engaged with you."

"I hope her ladyship will pardon the liberty I have taken," said Mr. Tallant, "and your lordship too."

"Certainly," said Amy, "kindly ring the bell, my love."

One of the matched ones came presently and

brought her ladyship an Indian shawl, followed by her ladyship's maid, who brought a light Tuscan hat; and then the Countess and her brother went out upon the terrace, whilst the moon was beginning to show itself through the evening clouds and in the lake beneath.

Whilst they were on the terrace the vicar of Brazencrook, who had been visiting in the neighbourhood, made his appearance, and he and the Earl becoming interested in an abstruse topic upon which the parson desired reference, they adjourned to the library, leaving the Countess and her brother alone.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHAT THE MOON SAW."

"THE amount is too large," said the Countess; "too large, I am sure, even if I asked his lordship to assist me."

"I must have it, and you must get it," said Richard Tallant.

"Indeed!" said the Countess; "you are very peremptory."

"As peremptory as Fate," said the other.

They had walked along the terrace, past the modern mansion and beneath the ruin of the old castle, Amy thinking it best that they should be out of danger of being overheard by servants who might be near any of the upper windows above the terrace.

Lionel Hammerton, who had ridden in from an

opposite direction, saw the two figures, and, leaving his horse in the stable, walked round the back of the house to the ruin. The speakers had not noticed him; and as he approached behind an angle of the ruin he was startled by Amy speaking in an angry voice, and her brother answering with threats. He crept within the shadowy wall, beneath a clump of ivy, and listened. Perhaps Amy might require his help.

"By whatever means you may deem best you must help me out of this difficulty," said the brother.

"It would certainly be more becoming to speak respectfully, and leave musts and threats out of the question until I have time for consideration."

"There is no need for consideration. Yes or No: it is easily said."

"Suppose I say, No?"

"Then I go straight to that fool, your husband——"

"Sir!" said Amy, "this is an outrage!"

"Call it what you please—I go straight to Lord

Verner, and tell him of your love for his brother."

"But what will that avail you now? It is an old story, and I am married."

"Lord Verner does not know that you were madly in love with his brother; that he cast you off."

"No, no—how despicable!" said Amy.

"He cast you off, I say; that will be my story to Lord Verner. I shall tell him as a matter of duty. And something more too. Why is Mr. Hammerton here?"

"Because he is Earl Verner's brother, of course, and this is his home when he is in England," said the Countess.

"Because he is Lord Verner's brother, poor fool! Because he is your lover, my sister!—your lover!"

An exclamation of pain escaped from Amy's lips at the baseness of the insinuation conveyed in these words, and Lionel had almost rushed out to strangle her maligner on the spot; but discretion prompted him to remain where he stood.

"Oh, yes, it is very fine to assume an injured tone, but I saw him kiss you this morning—I saw him through the window. You cannot deny it. What will Lord Verner think of that? Eh, *ma bonne sœur?*"

"And this will be your story to Lord Verner," said Amy, trembling with indignation, "if I do not find the money you ask for?"

"It will most assuredly," said Richard.

"Then tell your story, sir—tell your story at once; I will rather throw myself upon Lord Verner's love, the consciousness of my own innocence, and the honour of Lionel Hammerton, than buy your silence any longer, you miserable unscrupulous man," said Amy; and then it seemed as if she hurried away, or as if they had passed within the old court-yard of the ruined castle.

Just then the moon shone forth brightly for a moment, and Lionel heard voices again in the direction of the court-yard; but the intervening walls were too thick for him to hear distinctly anything that was said.

As he came forth to reconnoitre a pistol was fired, and then a terrible cry broke upon the still evening air—a shriek that echoed through the broken old corridors, startling the bats and the owls. Hurrying to the spot, Lionel found Richard Tallant stretched upon the turf. And now the moon shone forth in all its autumnal glory, sending a pale gleam through the court-yard and athwart the figure of the dying man.

Hastily raising the body up, Lionel found that the man had been shot through the right temple. The ball must have penetrated the brain, for he was quite dead, and the blood was streaming down his pale cheek.

One of the castle servants had heard the report of the pistol and the cry that followed it, and he had hurried to the ruin too, and found Lionel supporting the dead body. Mr. Hammerton bade him alarm the household, and in a short time Richard Tallant was lying dead in the room to which his luggage had been carried.

What a terrible night it was—that night of the

murder! The police came from Brazencrook, and made all sorts of inquiries. They found a pistol lying near the spot where the body was found. A case of suicide was the first suggestion; but it seemed that a breast-pocket in the gentleman's coat was turned inside out, and torn as if something had been violently removed from it, and there was a bruise on the back of the right hand as if the deceased had attempted for a moment to defend himself after he had fallen, and been struck with a stick or with the butt-end of the pistol.

"Where is her ladyship?" Lionel asked of the maid.

"In her room, and very unwell indeed," was the reply.

Who could have committed this terrible deed? The thought flashed through Lionel's mind, and with it just the whisper of a terrible suspicion. What an awful weight of anxiety and misery it was!

The superintendent of the Brazencrook police intimated that he would like to put a few questions to Mr. Hammerton and the groom in his lord-

ship's presence, and also to Lord Verner himself. His lordship, therefore, invited the officer to go into the library with himself and the Brazencrook vicar, and here the policeman finished his inquiry for that day in the following manner:

First he obtained from Lord Verner the particulars of Mr. Tallant's arrival, and having brought the story up to the point where Mr. Tallant went out upon the terrace with his sister, the policeman desired to see Lady Verner, that she might continue the narrative; whereupon Lord Verner rebuked him as an insolent fellow, and reminded him that he was in the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of the county.

"Who has only a duty to perform, like myself," said the officer.

"You cannot see Lady Verner," said his lordship; "and your desire to do so is an impertinence. If you choose to conduct your inquiries respectfully you may continue them; if not, were you twenty times a policeman I would have you bundled out of this room, sir. There!"

"I bow to your superior authority, your lordship," said the officer, calmly. "May I ask you one more question before I proceed to put one or two to your servants?"

"You may," said Earl Verner.

"Did this gentleman come here on business?"

"I think he had some little business with his sister, the Countess."

"Thank you, my lord," said the officer.

"What is your name?" asked the officer, turning to the groom.

"Jones—Peter Jones," said the man.

"Tell me all you know about this affair," said the officer, "and how you found the deceased."

"I had suppered up Hector after Captain Hammerton had returned from Brazencrook, and I was just leaving the stable when I heard a gun or pistol fired off, and somebody shout. I went in the direction of the sounds, and there saw Mr. Tallant dead, and Captain Hammerton holding his head up."

"Very good," said the officer.

"Will you kindly explain what you know about it, Captain?"

"I heard the report of fire-arms," said the Captain, "and hurrying to the spot, found the poor gentleman dying. He was not quite dead when I raised him up."

"How far were you away from the spot, sir?"

"A hundred yards, perhaps."

"You were near the ruin, then?"

"Yes; by the keep."

"Had you been there long?"

"Only a short time."

"Were you with the deceased?"

"No."

"May I ask what brought you near the ruin?"

"Seeing some one walking there, I had gone in that direction when I gave my horse to Jones."

"Did you see one or two persons?"

"I thought I saw two."

"Did you hear voices?"

"I believe I did."

"Did any one leave the ruin whilst you were there?"

"I cannot say."

"Did Lady Verner? Her ladyship had been walking on the terrace with her brother."

"I don't know," said the Captain, his heart beating wildly with a burning suspicion that haunted him like a ghost.

"You were going towards the figures when you heard the pistol," said the officer. "Did you go straight in the direction of the persons you thought you saw?"

"Not quite."

"You put the keep and that corner of the ruin to the right between them and you?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Captain Hammerton. There will be an inquest to-morrow on the body. I suppose we may rely upon your attendance."

"Certainly," said Lionel.

"Shall we remove the body for the inquest, your lordship?"

"It is not necessary," said the Earl.

"Good night, my lord—good night, gentlemen," said the officer, leaving the room.

When he was clear of the castle gates the police superintendent despatched the policeman who was with him to Brazencrook for three more officers, who were to meet him near the ruins as quickly as possible. When they came he posted them at various distant points commanding the castle, and bade them take any person into custody who might attempt to leave it during the night, the vicar of Brazencrook alone excepted.

In the castle that night two persons gave themselves up, during the still hours, to their wakeful thoughts. When the Countess heard the whole story, a terrible solution of the mystery suggested itself to her mind. Lionel Hammerton had overheard her brother's threats, and had shot him in his fear and passion; for he knew how much the Earl's happiness was bound up in the love of his wife. It was a terrible thought, but came again

and again into Amy's troubled mind; and all the time, think whatever he might, it seemed as if the devil whispered in Lionel's ear, "She killed him." He knew that it was a miserable morbid thought arising out of excitement, and overhearing the dead man's threats, and his violent taking off occurring at so important a moment for Amy's peace. And so these two fought with the ghosts of fancy, whilst the policeman half suspected Lionel, who had blood upon his coat, which, however easily accounted for, was still blood for all that.

What a blessing it would have been for them all if they could have seen that dark, halting shadow, which had flitted about amongst the ivy, and in out-of-the-way nooks and corners of the old ruin all the day long; that same figure which had haunted Richard Tallant in the Great City; that same figure which, on the night before, had slept beneath a tree in Kensington Palace Gardens, near Mr. Tallant's house; that same figure which had glided behind his carriage in the early morning,

and perched upon the springs behind; that same figure which had travelled by the same train, and disappearing amongst the passengers at Brazencrook, had haunted Richard Tallant far away in the distance, through the harvest fields, and along the white highway; that same figure which had leaped upon him with a hissing taunt, and pressed the cold weapon to his head that the work of destruction might be certain. Oh, if the police could but have met that creeping, stealthy figure, as it hugged that pocket-book, and crept away towards the woods for shelter, until the rain, which had been threatening to fall, should come down, and obscure the moonlight. In less than an hour great clouds rolled before the moon, and the rain fell in big splashing drops upon the trees, carrying now and then to the ground the first brown leaves of autumn.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH THE SEVERNSHIRE CORONER HOLDS AN INQUEST.

At noon the next day an inquest was held on the body at "The Magpies," the inn nearest Montem Castle—a roadside hostelry that stood back from the road, as if it had stepped aside for shelter beneath those great walnut-trees and elms which stretched their umbrageous arms over the lichen-covered roof. An open space in front was occupied by a pump and a wide trough, to which waggoners brought their horses, whilst they sat on the adjacent seat and tossed off brown sparkling ale from small glasses, which they refilled with a sort of pride from blue foaming jugs. There was the sign swinging between two bars like a wooden banner, displaying three mag-

pies in solemn conclave near a wood. The lichens on the roof had gradually dispersed themselves over the coping-stones of the old house, and the brown and yellow excrescences vied with the changing hues of the sheltering trees.

Upon the day mentioned there were unusual signs of life at "The Magpies." A crowd of idlers and gossips, men from the corners of Brazencrook streets, and boys and girls and hulking farm-labourers, lounged about the house, watching every movement of the police, and the coroner and the jury, with a dull but observant curiosity. When the jurymen went to view the body of the deceased man, and the spot where he was found, the little crowd followed at a respectful distance, and then came back again, after a walk of nearly three miles, to stare in at the window where the inquest was held, or drink beer in the tap-room.

The coroner opened the inquiry in a long and judicious address upon the circumstances of the case, and stated that the superintendent of the Brazencrook police had been anxious that Lady

Verner should be called upon to give evidence. He regretted, however, that her ladyship, who was unwell when the dreadful occurrence took place, had been so shocked by the event that she was now seriously ill, and her medical attendants were anxious that she should have repose of mind and body. His lordship had, however, kindly signified his intention of being present; he believed that he was now in the house, and if so, they would hear his evidence first.

Lord Verner entered the room opportunely at this moment, with his lawyer from Brazencrook, and followed by reporters from the adjacent towns, where the news of a "Dreadful Murder in the Old Ruin of Montem Castle" had already supplied materials for sundry second editions of sundry newspapers. There is no more startling illustration of the rapid rate at which we live in these times than that afforded by the chronicles of our daily history. The other day, we were grubbing over the files of an old newspaper which was published weekly, coming out on Saturdays at

noon with a foolscap sheet of postal news and rumours, a few advertisements, and sundry marriages and deaths; it was the leading journal of a great city—a city divided by a river, upon which vessels came and went on their way to America and the East Indies, and other distant countries. In this Saturday's paper we came across a paragraph of local news, to the effect that "We hear that a dreadful murder was committed in Bedminster, on Wednesday evening;" then followed two or three lines indicating the manner of the murdered man's death; and this was all the information considered necessary for the reader. Bedminster was really a portion of the city in which the journal was published, and in the present day that same paper would, between the time of the murder and the Saturday publication, have reported the fullest details of the crime, with a description of the scene of the murder, the antecedents of the dead man, a full report of the inquest and finding of the jury, and, supposing the criminal captured, a full report of the examination before

the magistrates, and committal, occupying in the narration of this one case as much type and paper (to say nothing of writers and printers) as would have published the old journal for several weeks.

Thus the local newspapers of Severntown, and Brazencrook, and Avonworth, gave the whole district the speediest and fullest information relating to the tragedy, with an eloquent and graphic sketch of the scene by that smart gentleman who "did" the Verner marriage with the prayer-book service in it.

They told how Lord Verner was the first witness examined, and how his solicitor, Montagu Masters, Esq. (of the firm of Masters & Filmer of Brazencrook), watched the proceedings in the interests of the family. They repeated that story of the deceased's arrival and his going out to walk, which is already fully known to our readers. Then they gave the evidence of Jones the groom, and finally the somewhat remarkable statement of Lionel Hammerton, which was the most interesting portion of the inquiry, seeing that the coroner cautioned the Captain

in unusually solemn terms that what he said would be taken down in writing, and as he was unfortunately with the deceased when Jones came up, that circumstance might possibly prove inconvenient and troublesome to him, to say the least.

Mr. Montagu Masters had quite a battle royal over this point with the coroner; but her Majesty's representative finally put the lawyer down by intimating that he was only permitted to be present in this court by courtesy, and that he (the coroner) would conduct this inquiry in his own way.

This most effectually prejudiced the minds of the jury against Lionel Hammerton, who certainly gave his evidence in a hesitating and dubious manner, which seemed fully to justify the suspicion of the police that he had murdered the deceased.

In the midst of Lionel's examination the groom was recalled.

"How long after the Captain gave you his horse was it that you heard the noise which induced you to go to the ruin?"

"About a quarter of an hour," was the reply.

"Did the Captain go straight in that direction when he left the stable yard?"

"He went the shortest road."

"Was he in the habit of taking a walk in that direction after riding?"

"I can't say."

Then the surgeon was recalled.

"The bruise upon the right hand is recent, you say?"

"Yes."

"Supposing the deceased had shot himself, it would have been almost impossible that he could have fired the pistol with his left hand?"

"Quite impossible, I should say, and considering the position of the wound there would have been some little difficulty with the right; but of course he could have used both hands; the wound is quite compatible with the supposition of suicide."

The superintendent of police was also recalled, and he said that at the place where the deceased gentleman fell there were marks as if a struggle had taken place, and on searching the

body no papers had been found. Morris, his lordship's man, had seen the deceased with a pocket-book, and from the way in which the breast pocket of his coat had been dragged open and torn, it would seem as if something (perhaps the pocket-book, as that could not be found) had been forcibly removed. He would also venture to point out to the coroner that although the groom hurried to the spot immediately upon hearing the noise, the Captain was there before him with the deceased's head upon his knee. If he had committed suicide the Captain must have been close to the spot at the time, and yet he heard voices.

Mr. Masters protested against this police statement.

The coroner said it was not evidence, and he was not taking it down.

Lionel Hammerton said he had no objection to the policeman's theorising. He certainly was the first on the spot; and there was blood upon the coat which he had just been informed the policeman had sent for to the hall.

It was well Earl Verner had long since left the court and knew nothing of this, or there would have been a fierce struggle between the leading authorities.

The points which stood out most prominently in the inquiry were the facts that the deceased had come to Montem on some business with his sister the Countess; that in the twilight they walked out to converse; that Lionel Hammerton, on returning from Brazencrook, instead of going into the house, goes towards the ruin by the nearest route; that no more is heard or seen of Lady Verner; that by-and-by a pistol is fired off, and Hammerton is found supporting the body of the deceased; that there is evidence of a struggle, though a brief one; that Hammerton can give no reason for going towards the ruin except that he saw two figures; that nobody can throw any light upon the nature of the business between the deceased and his sister; that the visit was altogether a peculiar one, the deceased leaving his luggage at the Verner Arms at first, and then sending

for it, as though he were not certain of a kind reception at the Castle; that neither paper nor notes are found upon him; that his pocket-book is missing, though his watch and purse, containing gold, remain. If the deceased was murdered the crime had been one, not prompted suddenly by robbery so much as by revenge, or a robbery of papers or letters of some kind which might be more valuable than money.

The inquest was adjourned, and in the evening Lord Verner and his brother had a long, serious talk in the library; but it consisted chiefly of speculations about Tallant's death, and the Earl firmly believed that he had committed suicide.

"What figures did you see, Lionel?—Her ladyship must have returned into the house, poor soul, for her maid tells me she had a terrible headache, and came in very soon after she brought her shawl and hat."

"No doubt," said Lionel, "it could not have been her ladyship."

Poor fellow, what was he to say! "What a

tangled thread we weave, when first we practise to deceive!" One lie led to another; with that awful suspicion burning in his heart,—and it would not go, despite all his efforts—Lionel's chief aim was to shield the Countess.

"You heard voices, you say?"

"Yes."

"Were you listening to them, or what?"

"I did listen a moment or two."

"Why did you listen? what did you suspect?"

"I do not know; there are times when we do things the most trivial without being able to explain why or wherefore."

"So there are. Your belief that you heard voices, and the statement that you saw two figures, clearly point to the theory of murder as against suicide."

"Yes," said Lionel.

"How could the murderer have escaped? You were on the spot in an instant almost, it seems."

"I was there very quickly."

"And you saw no one?"

"No, only Tallant on the ground."

"From what Masters says, there is no doubt that that fool of a policeman has taken it into his thick head that *you* killed Richard Tallant," said his lordship, in a tone of contemptuous coolness.

"I thought so last evening, and see it clearly to-day," said Lionel.

"Let him have a care, Lionel, how he tampers with the name and fame of the house of Verner. By heavens I will punish him! The thing is absurd on the face of it."

"I suppose the idea is that a man found by the side of one who is murdered should be able to give a succinct account of his death."

"Once a policeman starts a theory of his own respecting any particular crime, he thinks of nothing else; he follows no clue which does not support that theory; he rejects all evidence that may tell against it; his leading idea is that somebody must be apprehended and convicted for it; and this Brazencrook fellow is a shallow-pated, ambitious booby, whose fingers are itching to have a distin-

guished prisoner; he is anxious to create a sensation," said the Earl.

And so they continued to talk the affair over, whilst the gossips in the neighbourhood and throughout the country theorised upon it, and cleared up the mystery in their own way. Meanwhile, Lady Verner, to all appearance, continued very ill, and no word concerning recent events was to be whispered in her hearing; but when there was no one present but her maid she brightened up and insisted upon hearing of all that had occurred. Lady Verner was not so ill as she seemed.

At night when the shallow-pated and ambitious policeman, as Earl Verner called him, was smoking his pipe over his own fire, and relating the incidents of the day to his admiring wife, an assistant in the shop of the leading gunsmith of the place knocked at the door and wished to see the superintendent privately and on particular business.

"I come as an act of duty," said the young man, "although I know I shall lose my place by it, for the master dared and forbade me to come to you."

"Yes," said the officer, shutting the door of his private office, and taking his seat at his desk beneath a long row of handcuffs and cutlasses.

"Captain Hammerton bought two pistols at our shop to-day."

"Yes," said the officer, writing down the words, the name of the assistant, the name of the master, &c.

"A revolver, and an ordinary pistol."

"Yes, go on; I will not interrupt you, tell your own story."

"He bought the ordinary one because it attracted his fancy—the stock was peculiar. The revolver, he said, he wanted to take to India with him, and he was going to London in the morning."

"Going to London in the morning; yes," said the officer, writing industriously.

"He bought bullets and powder."

"Yes," said the officer.

"That is all; hearing what I did about the inquest, I though it right in the interest of justice that you should know this."

"Quite right; did he take the pistols with him?"

"No; we were to send them by Lord Verner's groom when he passed with the letters."

"Oh!" said the officer, "that alters the case."

"When did the groom call?"

"Not until this morning."

"What the deuce is the good of that?" said the officer angrily; for he was greatly disappointed. He had hoped that the next moment when he should produce the pistol found in the ruins, the gunsmith's assistant would identify it.

"That will do—thank you all the same, though there is nothing much in it; however it *may* be useful; if so you shall hear from me again."

When the officious apprentice had gone, the Brazencrook chief leaned back in his chair and soliloquised.

"It shows he was thinking of pistols, at any rate—that is something; he had deadly weapons in his mind. Not much in that perhaps, being a soldier, but put this and that together. And then about

going to London to-day. Ha! I must get at that point. I'm morally certain he killed the man, and Lady Verner knows something about it. There was a quarrel, something about her perhaps; she is pretty and young, and——"

Another knock at the door, and enter a gentleman whom we have seen before, though a stranger to the chief of the Brazencrook police—Mr. Bales from Scotland Yard.

The Brazencrook officer was delighted to receive so distinguished a visitor.

Mr. Bales said he knew something of the murdered man and his connections, and on making certain representations at head-quarters, he had come down "on spec," in fact, "on his own hook." A large reward would, no doubt, be offered for the discovery of the murderer, for it was a case of murder,—nobody in their senses could doubt that —and Lord Verner would, of course, second the Government efforts to clear up the mystery.

The local officer said, mysteriously, he was not so sure of that; he believed he was on the right

track; if such should prove to be the case, of course, he would have the reward, or at any rate the greatest share of it.

"Certainly," said Mr. Bales, "certainly; I have not come down here to rob you, my friend."

"Well, I think not; you are too great a man; but that is mostly the little game of the London detectives who come interfering in a thing like this, 'on spec,' as you say."

"It is not mine, I assure you."

"Then we will make a bargain."

"Yes, if you like."

"Supposing my clue is right, and I get hold of the right man, you lay no claim to the reward."

"I consent."

"And supposing you are the successful hand, you divide the reward with me."

"I consent to that also—but it is just possible neither of us may touch the money; there is generally a third party who brings these things to light in country districts: somebody comes and gives information of something that has escaped the

police, eh ?" said the London detective, with just a slightly sarcastic smile.

"There will be nothing of that sort in this case," said the superintendent, who made up his mind there and then that, supposing a reward were offered, and that he received the announcement of the same in the morning, he would, at all risks, apprehend Lionel Hammerton.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHIEF OF THE BRAZENCROOK POLICE MAKES A BOLD STROKE FOR THE GOVERNMENT REWARD.

The Brazencrook officer, after sleeping upon the resolution he had made, received notification of the Government reward; and, determined not to be bilked by Mr. Bales, he went off quietly the next morning to Montem Castle, and asked for Captain Hammerton.

When Lionel appeared, he said,—"Will you be good enough to come a little way with me; there is a man who has a question to ask you?"

Lionel looked puzzled for a moment at the request, and then replied,—"Certainly, if you desire it."

"Yes I do," said the officer; and without another word they went forth together.

When they were outside the Castle gates, the superintendent said, "The truth is, I did not wish to make any fuss; but I went to Mr. Smith, the county magistrate, early this morning, and upon the facts that I considered it my duty to lay before him, he granted me a warrant for your apprehension; and I now claim you as my prisoner on the charge of wilfully and maliciously killing Richard Tallant."

Saying this the officer laid his hand upon Lionel's arm, who started as if he had been stung. The officer thereupon gave a shrill whistle, and two policemen rushed out from a hiding place in the hedge.

"If you will go quietly with me," said the officer, "I will dismiss these men?"

"You may rely upon it I shall make no attempt to escape, not that your men would intimidate me were I inclined to have a fight for it," said Lionel, stretching himself up to his full height and surveying the force. "You represent the law so far that you are its officer: you may dismiss your fellows."

The chief did so at once, and when he and Lionel reached "The Magpies," there was a cab waiting to convey them to Brazencrook.

When Earl Verner learnt what had taken place, he rode to Brazencrook, and demanded that Lionel should be released, fumed and threatened, and at last discovered that although he was an Earl and Lord-Lieutenant of the County, the Brazencrook police superintendent was master of the situation. Lionel was taken before the Brazencrook bench, and remanded until the conclusion of the inquest, and was then conveyed to "The Magpies" at the request of the coroner, that he might hear the remainder of the evidence.

The jurymen were considerably surprised at what the Brazencrook officer had done, and so was the coroner, who said, in commencing the business of the day, that the superintendent had, he hoped, acted on evidence which had come to his knowledge since the business of the previous day; otherwise he had no hesitation in saying that he had committed a serious error. He was a plain, out-

spoken fellow, this Severnshire coroner, who, though he might not always conduct his investigation with legal discretion, fearlessly searched out the truth, and endeavoured to do justice.

It was soon noised abroad that the Earl's brother was in custody; and this fact was conclusive in the minds of large numbers of persons, especially of the lower order, that he was guilty. There was a great crowd about the inn on this second day, and a numerous body of policemen, chiefly of the county force, to keep the mob in order. "The Magpies" never had so good a time of it. The landlord had been compelled to send into Brazencrook for fresh supplies of beer and spirits, and several additional waiters had to be employed in serving the thirsty customers.

The only additional witnesses were the gunsmith's assistant and a railway clerk; the former to make that absurd statement about the prisoner purchasing pistols and ammunition, which were not ent home until after the murder; the latter to prove that it was Lionel's intention to leave Mon-

tem Castle that day. But there was another fact which the officer thought a great deal of. In the prisoner's pocket-book there were some memoranda relative to an account between the deceased and himself, with regard to some share speculations prior to the panic, and in the margin was written in pencil,—"*This was a downright swindle of Tallant's.*"

In addition there was a scrap cut from a newspaper, alluding to a *fracas* which had taken place at the Ashford Club, and in which the Hon. Lionel Hammerton's name was mentioned, and also Mr. Tallant's.

Our readers will remember that Lionel had alluded to this gossiping paragraph when he left England. They also know that Hammerton had been led into speculations by Tallant, which had ended in grievous losses that seriously involved Lionel, and had cost the Earl no small sum. The policeman naturally argued from these papers and memoranda, that there had been a quarrel between his prisoner and the deceased; and he laid them

before the coroner's jury with an air of triumph.

But the coroner strongly advised the jury to adjourn for a week, and they did so, leaving the onus of committing the prisoner for trial on the magistrates. Meanwhile Mr. Bales, the detective, did not agree with the opinion of the Brazencrook police. The case bothered him considerably, he acknowledged; but he could not bring himself to think that the prisoner had killed Richard Tallant. If the crime had been committed in London, he would certainly have looked up Mr. Shuffleton Gibbs; for, in the course of the inquiries he had made in those past days for Mr. Christopher Tallant, and since then, he had come across suspicious transactions in which Mr. Gibbs had been mixed up when the ex-swell was in the hey-day of his questionable glory. Hunting out this same gentleman for Mr. Williamson, and finally bringing him to Bow Street to be unsuccessful in his charge against him, the detective knew that Gibbs had appealed to Mr. Tallant in vain for assistance.

But Gibbs was a broken-down, drunken wretch: what could he do down here? However, it might be worth while to run up to town, and see if the fellow had been away.

In the evening Mr. Arthur Phillips and his wife arrived at Montem Castle. The Earl welcomed them heartily, and poor Amy, who had come downstairs wrapped up with shawls, fell upon her dear friend's shoulder, and sobbed until Phœbe's heart ached with sympathetic sorrow. What a weary, weary time it was!

Lord Verner started early the next morning to town, that he might personally consult his London solicitors, and take some potent action against the police, or the magistrates, or anybody and everybody by whom his brother was detained in custody. The poor Earl was almost beside himself with indignation and passion.

And all this time that shrinking, hiding, halting, slouching figure, which the reader has seen before, had found shelter in Brazencrook. Moving in the darkness, with the rain splashing on the highway

and hissing in the hedgerows, the figure stalked back again towards Brazencrook, instead of getting away from that town, as the cunning mind had planned. But having no knowledge of the district, and being nervous and excited, and lacking gin, the wretched criminal had succeeded the next day in reaching the town he would have avoided; and when Mr. Bales was thinking of going to town as a sort of forlorn hope, or an excursion by the way, to see Gibbs, this same Gibbs was imbibing his favourite liquor at a sixth-rate tavern at Brazencrook, and reading a full account of the murder in the "Brazencrook Daily Banner."

"Hang that bruise on the hand," thought the half-tipsy reader—"clear case of suicide but for that—clear case of *felo-de-se*—they might have buried the beast in the cross-roads. A rum go if they hang that swell Hammerton—a very rum go. I must burn this pocket-book, and the cheques too for the matter of that—it's no good trying to cash them; I can get rid of the notes easily enough. What an infernal scoundrel he was, to be sure—

threatening his sister the Countess! By Jove, I was close to him then; she ought to thank a fellow for stopping his mouth. How he clutched me—a good thing the pistol was pretty heavy, but confound that bruise and the torn pocket! That policeman is a clever fellow; nobody else would have thought of the pocket-book: wish I'd had time to get his purse—these notes are a nuisance. I'm safe enough, that's one thing—good idea following the thief by train, deuced good!"

Thus the gin-drinker's thoughts flitted through his mind, as he sat before the tavern fire drinking raw spirits and drying his clothes, a poor thin, wretched-looking object, with one foot in the grave, as the slipshod servant had said to her boozy master, when he asked who it was that had such "a big swallow."

CHAPTER XV.

CONTAINS A CURIOUS ILLUSTRATION OF DETECTIVE PHILOSOPHY, AND IS AN IMPORTANT LINK IN THIS HISTORY.

"WELL, I shall be off to town," said Mr. Bales to the superintendent of the Brazencrook police, on the third morning after his arrival. "This case is a floorer to me."

The constable smiled, and thought he had certainly done the detective.

"I have been connected with Scotland Yard for some years now, and had a tolerable experience in America too, and I don't think I have felt so helpless as I do in this business; so I called in to say good-bye, and wish you well through the case."

"Don't go for a few minutes," said the superintendent: "rather a singular disappearance of bank

notes has been reported to me just now; you may like to hear the story; being here on spec, you know, and not a very successful spec, perhaps you might like to try your hand at another case."

The speaker smiled a little sarcastically, but as much as to say, having beaten your head off in this Montem business, I can afford to be generous.

"All right," said Bales; "better luck next time."

"Will you hear about this note job?"

"Certainly," said Bales.

Whereupon three gentlemen entered the room. The first, a fat, fussy little man, said he was the proprietor of the Brazencrook Music Hall; that half an hour ago he went to the Old Bank to pay in three hundred pounds. It consisted of a miscellaneous roll of notes. He pushed the money upon the counter towards the receiver in the usual way; and at that moment "this gentleman," pointing to the Rev. Thomas Barnes, curate of All Souls, asked him a question about some subscription to a fund for a poor family

formerly in his employ, and when he turned round the money was gone.

The second speaker was the receiving clerk at the bank, who said when Mr. Flooks came in he noticed that the gentleman pushed a parcel upon the counter; but when he laid down his pen to take it there was no money to be seen.

"What were you doing when Mr. Flooks entered the bank?" asked the chief of police.

"I was casting up some figures."

"Did you attend to Mr. Flooks at once?"

"I did not; I finished my casting first."

"Did you see the notes on the counter?"

"I saw something which appeared to be a bundle of notes."

"When did you know the money was gone, Mr. Flooks?"

"As soon as I turned round. I expected the receiver had taken it up, but he said, 'Where's the money?'"

"And there were only you and Mr. Barnes here in the bank at the time?"

"That's all," said Flooks.

"And did nobody come in and go out?"

Upon this point there was a little difference of opinion. The curate believed a person passed out whilst he was speaking to Mr. Flooks. The cashier also thought a man came in and went out again.

When it was discovered that the notes were gone, careful investigation was made by the manager of the bank on the spot, and a search was instituted, which had been considered rather offensive by the receiver; but the money was gone, and here the story ended.

"Have you the numbers and description of the notes, Mr. Flooks?"

"No; I very seldom take any precautions of that kind about notes, because I always make a point of paying all cash into the bank myself."

Here, it seemed to Bales, was another case as free from a clue to the criminal as that of the murder at Montem. He felt as if his skill were specially challenged, and he resolved at once to delay his return to London.

"You will really not be offended at my meddling in this case?" he said to the Brazencrook chief.

"Not at all—not at all. I question whether Mr. Flooks really put any money on the counter. These professionals, as they call themselves, are up to so many dodges for advertising and all that sort of thing. If he did put any money on the counter, I suppose the fact of a parson condescending to speak to him flurried him, and he forgot where he was, because they have been preaching against his entertainment."

The superintendent was quite friendly in his conduct towards Mr. Bales, and said he should be glad if he hit the mark in this business better than he had done in that other little affair.

Mr. Bales, after paying Mr. Flooks a private business visit, and seeing several letters referring to £280 (which was really a payment to Flooks for the goodwill, scenery, &c., of a small music-hall establishment at Severntown), went to his lodgings, reported himself for two days further leave of absence, lit a cigar, and quietly thought over the

story he had just heard. There was clearly nothing in the Brazencrook officer's idea about Flooks having lost no money: there was the transaction before him accounting for the receipt of £280 out of the £300. Could the cashier himself be the thief? No. The curate?—the receiver? No. Had the job been done by a professional thief? He thought not. He could not exactly say why. He thought that this was a case of sudden temptation and robbery. This was his theory: the receiver had been busy at his desk; Flooks, the Casino proprietor, flurried, as the policeman had said, by talking to a parson—had been engrossed in the clerical conversation; a third party had come in on business, and had walked out again unobserved with the notes in his pocket. Under such circumstances, the thief would naturally become worried and nervous, when he got into the street, as to his next step. What would he be likely to do? Brazencrook was a large town—a town of some eighty thousand inhabitants—a busy, bustling place. What would the fellow do—slink away? If

he were a professional thief, no doubt he would. But a new hand—there was a cab-stand close by, and he would call a cab—of course he would, Bales repeated to himself. He made inquiries at once. There were only two flys on the stand, and the drivers had not taken a fare that morning.

"Drive me to the next stand," said Bales, stepping into the first cab.

He was unsuccessful at the second stand and at every other. No driver remembered having taken up any person near the Old Bank at about eleven o'clock. He determined to see every cab-driver in Brazencrook before he gave up this first part of his theory of the robbery. The Abbey chimes were slowly hammering out the morning hymn for the second or third time that day, when the detective alighted from the last cab to prosecute his inquiries on foot, resolving to stop every fly he met in the streets.

The chimes had hardly finished, when an old fellow pulled up an empty cab near the Abbey

entrance, and got off his box to tie a dirty hay-bag upon his horse's nose.

Bales put his question to him—had he taken up anyone near the bank that morning?

Near the bank! Yes, he had.

"Who?"

"A gentleman's servant."

"Did he come out of the bank?"

"He did."

"Here is half-a-crown—take me to the spot where you took him up."

"Certainly, with pleasure, sir," said the man, and in a few minutes he pulled up within a few yards of the Old Bank.

"And now drive me to the place where you put him down."

In ten minutes he pulled up again. Bales alighted.

"Well, where did he go?"

"He went into that house yonder—the last in the crescent."

Then Bales made the driver describe the servant

carefully, and after taking a note of the number of the fly, he knocked at the door of the last house in the crescent, feeling convinced that he was on the track of the roll of notes.

A maid servant came to the door.

"Is James in?" asked Bales, familiarly.

"We have no James here," said the girl, smiling. "Our James is a Thomas."

"Well, is he in the house?"

"No, he ain't," said the girl.

"He was in this morning," said Bales.

"Yes, but he ain't now; he's gone into the country."

"When did he go? I want to see him very particularly."

"About an hour ago. His aunt's took very bad."

"Where does she live?"

"That I can't tell you."

"When is he coming back?"

"Ah, that's what master's just asked me; but that's what I don't know."

"All right," said the detective to himself, as he left the house. "This is my man."

He made inquiries at the railway station, but nobody remembered having seen "Thomas" there. Only one train had gone out within the hour, and that to London. Bales telegraphed to Paddington, but at the same time felt pretty well satisfied that Thomas had not gone away by train.

He made inquiries about other conveyances leaving Brazencrook. There was a coach to Severntown, but only on Monday and Friday, and this was Tuesday.

"There's a carrier's cart to Avonworth," said the ostler at the Verner Arms.

"Avonworth! That is on the high road to Severntown and London?"

"Yes, it be."

"When does it go?"

"About four o'clock on Tuesdays, and six on Saturdays."

The carrier's cart had been gone two hours, and there was a train to Avonworth half an hour hence.

"Perhaps my friend started to walk, and the carrier will pick him up. The road to Avonworth is his most likely way. He may have started with the carrier and gone the whole journey. It is what he might do, innocent or guilty," thought Bales.

In a short time Bales had donned his countryman's attire—the smock and all-rounder, without which he never travelled; and by half-past six he was at Avonworth. The carrier's cart had not arrived. He loitered about, and presently had the satisfaction to see it come creeping along the dusty highway, and finally enter the "Lion" yard, and, what is more, out stepped "Thomas."

The man did not enter the inn, but walked away out of the town and along the road towards Severntown. By-and-by he left the highway and turned into the turnpike road. He wore an overcoat and an ordinary hat, but nobody could have mistaken the light brown livery trousers.

Bales followed him at a distance for a couple of miles, and then "Thomas" entered a roadside

inn. Shortly, the detective was sitting in the same room, where he had ordered brandy-and-water hot. And lo and behold, Mr. Bales recognised the face of our poor friend, THOMAS DIBBLE.

The detective directed the girl to bring him a pint of hot ale and gin, known by the euphonious title of dog's-nose, of which smoking liquor he politely offered a glass to "Thomas."

Poor Dibble treated this little act of courtesy coldly, but tasted the liquor notwithstanding, and then Bales began to talk. He was a farmer, going to be married; he was on his way to Brazencrook to see his Sarah, who lived in service there. How far was it to Brazencrook? Dibble did not know. It was a nice place, Bales had heard? Yes, *he believed* it was. And then Bales ordered some more gin and ale, for the night was closing in wet and cold.

At length the ice was thoroughly melted, and the two men talked and smoked and drank in good-fellowship. "Thomas" was highly amused at the detective's simplicity.

As the evening wore on Dibble gradually became thick and confused in his speech, and then Bales saying it was time for him to go, rang the bell and asked the girl to see if the landlord could change him a fifty-pound note. This was the sum he had saved for the purpose of marrying Sarah at Brazencrook!

"You shan't schange a fifty-pun' note," said Dibble; "noshing of the short."

"No, master could not change a fifty-pound note," the girl said; "pretty well, he thought, if he could change a five-pound note."

"All right," said "Thomas," thrusting his right hand into a breast-pocket of his coat, and producing a roll of notes, "I've got a five pun' note."

Poor Dibble! When the detective showed him a pair of handcuffs, and charged him with robbery, he burst into tears.

It was as the detective had guessed, a case of sudden temptation. The robbery had been committed just as he had suggested; but there was no thirst for money for its own sake in poor Dibble's

wickedness. For weeks and months he had brooded over his wife's misfortunes; her taunts had sunk deep into his heart; he was miserable beyond description to think how she had been reduced; and all in a moment this bundle of notes had seemed to offer him and his wife release from their troubles. He had been sent to the bank to change a cheque. The notes were close to his hand; he touched them; nobody was looking; he seized them, and walked out of the bank as he came. Hurrying back to his master's, he gave the cheque to an under-servant, as though he had not had time to go to the bank, and then after that one bit of cleverness, he made a shambling excuse about an aunt in the country, and left Brazencrook.

Poor Dibble! He did nothing but moan about his poor dear wife,—his poor injured wife.

This smart bit of police detection was destined to lead to more important and startling results than the capture of Thomas Dibble, otherwise we should not have narrated it so circumstantially.

CHAPTER XVI.

"BAL. TO R. T., £300."

When Dibble was fairly locked up in the Brazencrook station, and Bales had indulged in a quiet joke with the Brazencrook chief, he had the curiosity to examine the roll of notes after Mr. Flooks had identified them.

Two of these notes were new Bank of Englands, and were for £10 each. At the back of one there were some figures in pencil,—a calculation evidently of interest, and the result was carried down at the corner—"Bal. to R. T., £300." Then the figures had been run through with the pencil, as though the writer had made a simple calculation of moneys on the spur of the moment, and the sum showed a balance of £300 to "R. T." Who was "R. T?" Singular that these should be the initials

of the man who was murdered at Montem! Mere coincidence thought the detective,—nothing in it; nevertheless, he would see Mr. Flooks again.

"Do you remember whether these notes were paid by the Severntown man in the £300?" said the detective.

"I do not."

"Yet you identified the bundle easily?"

"O yes, I could swear to the lot. But wait a moment; we will go into the Treasury."

And into the Treasury (as theatrical managers call the room occupied by the cashier of the establishment) they went.

"You paid me a balance of petty receipts and other things yesterday with the balance of the receipts of the night before."

"Yes," said the treasurer, "twenty pounds."

"Did you pay me in these notes?"

"I think so; I am not quite sure."

"Where did you get them?" asked the detective.

"From the bank. I changed your cheque for

£30, for the purpose of paying a poor-rate when you were away at Severntown," said the treasurer.

The detective extended his inquiries to the bank. A cheque had been cashed as described; but it had been paid in gold. The two notes in question had not passed through this bank.

Bales went back to the music-hall treasury.

"Did you cash that cheque yourself?" he asked the cashier.

"No, sir; I sent the porter to cash it."

"Will you let me see the porter?" said Bales.

Mr. Flooks sent out for the porter, who was no less a personage than our old acquaintance the showman, Digby Martin, *alias* Bill Smith, "The Magician of the North."

"You cashed a cheque on Friday for the treasurer?" said Bales, addressing the porter.

"Yes," said the man, hesitatingly. "Yes, I did."

"Send that dog out," said Mr. Flooks; whereupon a tall grey animal which had followed the porter in a very undog-like attitude, quietly disappeared behind the scenes.

"You got the money in gold?" said Bales, fixing the porter with his cold grey eye.

The man hesitated, held down his head, changed colour, and then looked at Mr. Flooks.

"Don't look at me," said Mr. Flooks, "attend to this gentleman."

"What is your name?" Mr. Bales asked.

"William Smith's my own name; Digby Martin was my professional name before I came down to being a porter," said the man.

"Come, you answered that question quickly enough; now why can't you tell me with the same rapidity whether you got gold for that cheque at the bank or notes?"

"I forget," said the porter, sulkily.

"No, you don't. Now come, Mr. Smith, you changed the gold for notes yourself; you can't deceive me. Now where did you get the notes?"

The porter made no reply, but turning upon his heel to leave the room, he said he did not know what the gentleman meant.

"Then I'll tell you, my friend," said Bales. "I

arrest you, William Smith, on the charge of being concerned in the murder of one Richard Tallant."

We need hardly say that the music-hall gentlemen were not a little surprised at this striking *dénoûment;* their astonishment was much greater than the porter's.

"Oh!" said the porter, when the detective produced those same "bracelets" which had frightened poor Dibble. "You've got the wrong 'un, guvner; but suppose I put you on the right track?"

"You had better be careful," said Bales: "anything that you may say now can be used in evidence against you."

"All right, guvner, the truth's the truth, and you shall have it. I've always done my duty by you, Mr. Flooks," said the porter.

"Yes, you have been a sober steady fellow for this year past," said Mr. Flooks.

"There's a bill out offering a reward to discover the man as did the deed, ain't there?"

"Yes," said Bales.

"I knows that, 'cos I've read it: me and Mo-

mus read it last night, and there's a free pardon for him as confesses who may know about it, and yet was not actually concerned in it."

"Yes," said Bales.

"Then here goes! The day after the murder as me and Momus were having a bit o' dinner in at the Music-Hall Tavern at the back of the house here, a traveller comes in—a half-starved looking sort of a chap—and he sets down afore the fire. Momus, that's my dog, sir, one of the wonderfullest animals out, sir. Momus smells at him, as if she had met him afore, and walks round him on her hind legs. That causes me to take notice of him like. The gal comes in, and he orders some grub, and asks if there's a fire in the other room: she says yes, and in he goes. 'Do you know him, Momus; does yer know the gent, old gal?' She wags her bit o' stump, as much as to say 'I does,' and so does yer guvner, says I, all of a suddent; 'cos it just then flashed on me that it were my son-in-law. Yes, gents, I ain't talking no bosh—my son-in-law, Mr. Jefferson Crawley."

Mr. Bales pursed up his lips, and gave a low whistle at this, and could not resist making other indications of his surprise and satisfaction.

"Oh, you knows him, do yer?" said the porter. "Well, arter a bit, I goes into the room, and I sees him a reading the newspaper all about the murder, and when I goes in he drops it as though it had bitten him. 'Don't yer like the news, guvner,' says I? 'don't you like it, son-in-law?' He looked awful at this. He bolted with my gal 'Chrissy,' you know."

The detective whistled again.

"Oh, you know'd her, did yer?" said the porter.

"I know she was not your daughter," said Bales.

"S'help me Davy, but you seem to know everything."

"Never mind, go on," said Bales.

"Well, he looked hawful, as I said afore, and I thought as he was a going to faint. He didn't, however. He rung the bell and ordered a pint of gin, and drunk it off, and then he seemed better.

'How come you here?' says he. 'How come you here?' says I. 'You seems to have been travelling; and what's that blood on yer shirt?' says I. 'Blood?' says he. 'Yes,' says I. 'O, I had a bit of a row.'—'O,' says I. With that I says, 'Where's my gal?' and then he begins to say as how she'd treated him shameful, and a lot of it, and gets to abusing me. Then he says, 'We're relations, you know;' and I says, 'Yes, of a sort.'—'I was a gentleman,' says he, 'till I know'd your daughter.'—'Perhaps,' says I. 'Fact!' says he; and then he tells me how she brought him to poverty, and all that, which I quite believe; and then, after his grub he says, says he, 'We're relations—brothers in distress, deceived by a wretched gal;' and it was a fact too; 'so let's drink,' says he; and he had another pint of gin, but I was not to be tempted. However, I has a little, and then I leaves him sitting afore the fire, drunk I should think, and he paid for what he had: so I leaves him, as he had took a bed for the night. 'You'll stand my friend?' says he, as I was

going; 'relations, you know!' and all that. When business was over, about twelve o'clock, I goes again, and I finds him muddling over the fire, still drinking gin, and I hears as he'd changed a five-pound-note; so says I, 'Guvner — son-in-law, money's flush with you;' and he says, 'Father-in-law, it is; and if you'll be my friend, it shall be with you: swear,' says he, and his hands trembled awful to behold: so I swears. 'I'm hawful bad,' says he, 'being out in the rain; be my friend—take care of me;' and I says, 'All right, guvner;' he puts his hand into his coat, pulls out a pocket-book, and gives me them two notes; then he seemed as if he was off his head, and I and the gal sees him to bed. That ere pocket-book, and the blood and altogether bothered me a good deal; and when I changed that cheque, thinks I, I'll get rid on 'em; 'cos you see, I didn't know what might happen, and somehow I thought as my son-in-law might have had a hand in the job, and you see, as we were sort of relations, and all that, I didn't like to say nothing, and especially as he wor

so bad—so hawful ill—and that's the whole truth o' the matter."

"And what became of him?" asked the detective; "don't answer unless you choose."

"O, bless yer life, he's there now in bed, and it's my humble opinion as he'll never stir out of it again."

He did "stir out of it again," nevertheless, and the decayed showman and his son-in-law were in Brazencrook lock-up within an hour, to the relief and release of Lionel Hammerton; for the Brazencrook chief deemed it necessary to get two magistrates at once to authorise the Captain's release from custody.

What a change came over the spirit of the Brazencrook policeman's dream, as he smoked his pipe and talked to his wife on this night over the kitchen fire! It needed all the wifely consolation which his admiring spouse could bring to bear upon his deep dejection, to save him from utter despair.

"I'm a ruined man! I'm a ruined man!"

was all the defeated officer could say. His two new prisoners were not more chapfallen than the Brazencrook chief, through whose fingers had slipped government reward, credit, reputation—everything which he hoped to gain—by his rash act of the morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE FIRELIGHT.

Earl Verner returned from London by the evening mail, after having put the law into active operation on Lionel's behalf. When he came bustling into the coziest of cozy drawing-rooms, having rushed in before anybody had time to go out and meet him in the hall, he was most agreeably surprised by a singularly happy-looking family party.

Lionel Hammerton, in the easiest of easy chairs (the hero of the evening, the especial delight of all beholders just then), was sitting near Mrs. Arthur Phillips, on one side of the fire. On the other sat the Countess, looking almost herself again, and close by her side was the artist. Before the fire, sitting in a rather constrained manner, was a

stranger—a mild-looking, inoffensive gentleman, with brown curly whiskers and expressive grey eyes. This latter person was Mr. Bales, whom Lionel had brought with him from Brazencrook, in order that he might relate the singular story of his capture to the Earl. His lordship being away, the Countess had insisted upon Mr. Bales coming into the drawing-room and telling her all about it.

And so they had sat in the firelight, this happy grateful group of friends, listening to the detective's story. It was one of those first chilly autumn nights with falling rain, when the farmer begins to have fears for the wheat which should have been carried the week before; one of those nights when the shortening of the days begins to be more particularly apparent, and when you feel that winter is really not far off, and the sooner it comes the better. So the curtains were drawn over the windows, and the great dogs in the fireplace were weighted with a glowing pile of wood. The firelight fairly contested supremacy of effect with the numerous wax candles, sending flickers of light into

the furthest corners, and reflecting its radiance in the mirrors on the opposite side of the room. Mrs. Arthur Phillips, with her wealth of wavy hair, her deep blue eyes, and those half-parted lips,—a round, rosy dimpled beauty,—(Dicksee's Miranda arrived at the full beauty of womanhood),—looked like some painter's dream of perfect loveliness in this softened light of evening. There was just a shade of melancholy now and then upon her fair hopeful features; but her newly-awakened joy at Hammerton's escape, chased the shadow away almost before there was time to note it. The Countess looked considerably older than Phœbe; there was an air of matronly and aristocratic dignity in Amy's manner which was entirely foreign to that of Phœbe. The anxiety which Amy had undergone had left its traces upon her; and for the last few days she had suffered a world of agony and remorse, which she could never explain to anybody. She had endured the cruellest tortures on Hammerton's account. She could not have borne up against her fears and sorrows much

longer; but for Hammerton's timely release the Earl would have known everything, and from her own lips.

Never had she prayed so fervently for guidance and succour and mercy as she had done during these few days of her severest mental agony; and it seemed to her as if her petitions had been specially answered in this most unlooked-for and marvellous release of Lionel Hammerton,—not only from custody, but from suspicion. And *he*, how grateful he was on her account; and he had felt a bitter pang of self-condemnation when he thought how deeply he had wronged her in his foul and absurd suspicion. It seemed to him as if Fortune had willed it that he should be unjust to this woman; as if Fate had put a finger upon his love to blight his dearest hopes. This woman, whom he had loved and lost through neglect and suspicion; this woman, the memory of whose love he had vowed to treasure up as a sweet dream of the past,—again had Fate stepped in and cast down the idol.

And so they sat there in the evening whilst

Mr. Bales related to them the story which we have already told in the previous chapters, and they all pitied poor Dibble. When "Thomas" was in his cell, he insisted upon telling Mr. Bales how he came to commit so great a crime. The reproaches of his wife had rung in his ears night and day. It had seemed as if the devil had told him to touch that roll of notes; and when he felt his hand upon the money, he could not help taking it. Crying like a child, and sitting on the edge of the little prison bedstead, Dibble said he had never known before what that beautiful prayer meant, in which we asked our Father to lead us not into temptation.

Whereupon the Countess told Earl Verner what she knew of Mrs. Dibble, and hoped that something might be done for both of them.

Mr. Bales said Mrs. Dibble's money had been all lost in one way or another during the panic, and this had led to all their misfortunes.

"Have you written to her, Mr. Bales?" the Countess asked.

"I have not, your ladyship. The prisoner was

most anxious that I should not do so: it would kill her, he said."

"What can we do, my lord, for these poor people?" asked the Countess, earnestly. "Is there no means of obtaining the man's release?"

"I fear not," said the Earl. "Who is the prosecutor, Mr. Bales?"

"The bank, I think, your lordship. It is a question whether the money belonged to the bank or to Mr. Flooks. The bank repudiated all responsibility at the outset."

"Oh, but surely they could be induced to withdraw from the affair, or make it up in some way, seeing that the money is restored?" said the Countess.

"There is a serious offence, my love, called compounding a felony, which might be an obstruction to your wishes," said his lordship. "My friend, Lord Tufton, is chairman of Quarter Sessions, I must talk to him upon the subject to-morrow; he can advise us best."

"Meanwhile, however, we can do something for

this woman Dibble. She was very kind to Lieutenant Somerton," said the Countess; "we must take care of her."

"I go to town in the morning," said Bales. "I shall be happy to be your messenger to her."

"By what train, Mr. Bales, do you leave?" her ladyship asked.

"At ten o'clock, your ladyship."

"That means half-past nine from Montem?"

"It does, my lady," said Bales.

"I will see you before you go, if you please, at nine in the morning," said the Countess.

"So early!" exclaimed the Earl.

The Countess smiled and nodded assent.

"One cannot rise too early to help a poor creature in trouble, Mr. Phillips," said the Countess, aside; adding, "and now, Phœbe, I think we may retire."

Phœbe took her ladyship's proffered arm; Lionel Hammerton opened the door, and the two women went up-stairs to sit and talk of the past and the present, and the time to come; to have one of those long confiding gossips which are so charming to

newly-married friends. But there was a gloomy shadow now and then which seemed to lay an icy finger upon their warm and tender words—the shadow of the dead man, Amy's half-brother—who lay in that darkened room above.

The gentlemen, when they were alone, adjourned, upon Earl Verner's invitation, to the billiard-room, not for the purpose of playing at the fascinating game of billiards, but to smoke and talk and drink spirits and hot water before they went to bed.

Lord Verner had heard in town that if Tallant had lived two more days, he would only have lived to be a disgraced and ruined man. His shares in the Meter Works had been sent into the market and sold, a heap of bills had been dishonoured, and he was involved to the last degree.

"I have a shrewd guess that he came down here to see if he could get money from his sister; knowing her generous disposition; I do not doubt that he came here as a forlorn hope. My solicitor said the opinion in town was that he had committed suicide."

"I am anxious to see his servants," said Mr. Bales. "I think his butler will be able to give some strong testimony against this man Gibbs."

Then, upon a remark from Lionel, they discussed the career of this miserable wretch. Lionel did not hesitate to relate the full particulars of that scene at the Ashford Club, which our readers will remember.

The detective thereupon added some other curious details of the downward career of Gibbs, carefully guarding himself in respect to Richard Tallant's connection with some of the transactions which he narrated. If his lordship had not been "a sort of relation" of the dead man, he would have made his stories more piquant with the introduction of some of the financier's schemes.

There was quite a cloud of smoke amongst the beautiful carved leather work of the billiard-room ceiling, before the Earl and his friends thought it necessary to adjourn. Their closing conversation turned upon the great success of Arthur Phillips as an artist; and Earl Verner complimented him

more particularly upon his taste in selecting a wife. Arthur deftly changed the subject, and Lionel readily caught at the opportunity to urge his brother to take no steps against that silly policeman at Brazencrook; but Earl Verner would make no promise at all about it.

"We will talk of that to-morrow," he said.

They sat for an hour over the fire, Lionel, Arthur, and Mr. Bales, after his lordship had gone to bed; Mr. Bales telling the two gentlemen all he knew about Paul Somerton. Lionel said he wished the young fellow had gone to India; he would like to make his acquaintance and apologise to him for a little act of discourtesy which lay heavily on his mind. It appeared from what the detective said, that Williamson had the credit at his club of having eloped with another man's wife, and his oldest friends were his severest critics. It was quite a joke at the club, Williamson's philanthropy, now: some of the fellows put the affair down to constitutional weakness. He had done something of the sort, they said, when he was a

very young fellow. That he was a fool was the worst thing they said of him nevertheless, and some of them pitied him, wondered at his silly infatuation, and was glad to hear that the husband had made no objection to his wife's fresh choice. But they missed the barrister's quiet benevolent face; some of them would miss the sovereigns that he lent so readily; and the motion of the clerical gentleman who called himself a professor of Hebrew mythology, that his name be expunged from the list of members of the club, was negatived unanimously.

Lionel could have sat all night listening to Bales telling these stories of Paul and Williamson, Tallant and Dibble, and so could Arthur Phillips, had that pretty wife of his not been waiting for him.

"Ah, I see you want to be off," said Lionel at length: "good-night, old boy. Bales and I have no magnetic attraction to induce us to lay down our cigars. Ah, well, never mind, Bales, we can't all expect to be Arthur Phillipses. Good-night,

dear old boy. Bales and I will smoke just one more cigar."

But old Morris, who would persist in sitting up until the Captain was ready to retire, looked at his watch and found that it was four o'clock by the time he had put the gas out and gone to bed,—shuddering with superstitious fear as he passed the room where the body of Richard Tallant was lying.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

How utterly friendless this dead man appeared to be. Nobody came to Montem Castle to weep over the bier; no man or woman came to look their last upon the white calm face. Two solicitors had been down to make inquiries concerning the state of his affairs. One of them represented the Meter Ironworks; the other was the solicitor to a banking company. Neither of them cared to go up that great oak staircase of Montem Castle into the room were the dead one lay. Their business was of a professional character. Lord Verner tried to avoid seeing them. Lionel Hammerton represented his brother, and endeavoured to answer the questions which the legal gentlemen asked; but they fought very hard for an interview

with Lord Verner. They were anxious to learn if there was any chance of his lordship contributing funds towards putting his brother-in-law's affairs in a solvent condition. They regretted that the extraordinary state of Mr. Tallant's affairs would not allow of their delaying their visit to Montem Castle until the funeral was over. Lord Verner winced at this reference to the murdered man as his brother-in-law, and promised to consider the application when the gentlemen were enabled to furnish a complete balance-sheet of the deceased's financial position.

The house in Kensington Palace Gardens was closed. One or two slouching fellows with big watch-chains, black hair and prominent noses, had called there soon after the news of the murder, to know if the master was really dead. The first gentleman of this class begged to look at the pictures in the dining-room. He had never looked closely into them; perhaps they would be sold now, and he might be a buyer. Several Stock Exchange men had called, partly out of curiosity,

and partly in the hope that there might be some one at the house to tell them that those little claims of theirs for "carrying over" would be honourably settled; but not a soul called out of respect to the man, or from any deep feeling of sorrow at his violent taking off. Certain tuft-hunters made inquiries, chiefly on account of the fellow being murdered in such aristocratic quarters, and a few "diners out" called to gossip with Tallant's man about his affairs—how he would cut up—if it was true he had died not worth a penny, &c. &c. But there was speedily an end to all this. The servants had not received their wages for the past few months, and when they began to feel that there was no chance of legacies, and little hope even of their wages being paid, they began to disappear, and with them disappeared sundry articles of plate and wearing apparel, ornaments, jewels, china, and other miscellaneous things. If certain officers of the law had not been speedily placed in possession of the establishment, even the pictures, in which the Jews had exhibited such a

lively interest, would soon have followed plate and jewellery.

After thundering at the great door (where Richard Tallant had stepped out into his carriage only a few mornings before) for a long time, it was opened by a lively-looking little man, with a woollen comforter round his neck, and a bowler hat upon his head. Mr. Bales understood his man immediately, and followed him into the kitchen, where he found another person of the bailiff profession, smoking a short black pipe and shuffling a pack of cards. They soon explained to Mr. Bales that they had nothing else to amuse them but cards. They had looked at everything in the house—at the pictures on the walls, the pictures in the books, and all the curious things up-stairs and down-stairs. They had searched every nook and corner to see if any money had been left about; but the servants had been before them in their investigations, and so they were unsuccessful.

The great house had a gloomy, melancholy

appearance; blinds down, furniture in disorder, rooms dusty and unswept. After a brief conversation with the bailiff's men, the detective hurried away to Westminster. The great brass plate was there as of old; the well-furnished offices; all that air of wealth and power which had been so attractive to the electioneering deputations in the late Christopher Tallant's days. But with the managing director's death, and the forced sale of his shares, the stock had fallen considerably in the market; and Mr. Bales found the directors discussing certain fraudulent bill transactions, which, through the managing director, involved the scheme in enormous liabilities. It was urged by the solicitor that the transactions were founded in fraud, and that the credit of the company was in no way compromised by them; but the board of directors were divided upon this, and the state of the concern, as the detective saw it, was all sixes and sevens. A rumour got abroad that it was to be wound up, and forthwith commenced all those intrigues which go on amongst a certain section of

the city lawyers, who have recently made such heaps of money by winding-up shaky companies.

The most satisfactory part of the detective's business in town, was the fulfilment of Lady Verner's commission concerning Mrs. Dibble. He was instructed to give that lady a fifty-pound note and bring her back to Montem Castle.

He found Mrs. Dibble in the little house to which she had removed under the auspices of Lieutenant Somerton; but she was evidently in very low water. She had heard nothing of her husband's crime.

"I have been exthpecting to have a letter from him for several days," she said, "and it was my hope that I should have got the charge of a set of chambers, with Thomas for porter; but they say the panic has done away with all that; and me and Mrs. Robinson, we have been into the city together for days, and to see the beautiful places as is to let, it do make one's heart ache, though there must have been swindling to build such

grand houses and then to fail; and I often think it is a mercy my dear pa is not alive, for he would to a certainty have lost his money in building some of those palaces."

"How long has your husband lived in Brazencrook?" Mr. Bales asked.

"Well, six months now, come December, though the family hath moved about a good deal, firtht from London, in Pall Mall, where one of the directors of the Meter Works first got him the situation, and then they went to Bath, and after to Brazencrook: it wath not my wish that Thomas should return to the menial employment of his bachelor days, but losing my money was a sore affliction, and Dibble, he thaith, 'Maria, I shall soon save money, and when the family is once settled in a place, which they expect soon to be, you can come and live in that town, wherever it is, and have your own little house, and I will sleep at home, which, Mr. Bales, was all the recompense he could make for the mithfortunes which have come upon us, and the change in that

position of society in which my poor dear pa brought me up, being, as I dare thay I have told you, a builder, and having large contracts, he could do."

"Then you have not heard of Mr. Dibble's recent efforts to restore a few hundred pounds of the lost money?" said the detective calmly, disregarding the injunctions of his prisoner.

"A few hundred pounds!" exclaimed Mrs. Dibble, bursting a hook and eye and making no effort to remedy the accident. "Hath he rethcued that thum from the fire? Well, so he ought; for what with one thing and another he thertainly hath been my ruin, for we should never have been in the panic at all but for him, though how that bank came to fail ith a mythtery to me which will never be cleared up."

"He has not exactly rescued the money as you say; but if you will pay attention to me for a few minutes, I will explain the case."

"Thertainly, I will pay attention with great pleathure, and more particularly as you theem to

have thome good news, you do nurse it so carefully, for if it was bad you would have out with it at wonth."

"No, it is not good news: it is bad news and good news together."

"Well, so that the good ith uppermotht, I can put up with a little bad," said Mrs. Dibble, proceeding to readjust one of the little jaunty curls that ornamented each side of her fair fat face.

She had not lost all those red and white and chubby charms which had attracted poor old Dibble in those early days of his London situation; but she was not so rosy nor so fat, nor so well dressed as she was when we saw her strumming out the "Old Hundredth" at that little square piano in Still Street; neither was she so demonstrative, nor yet quite so overbearing in her manner. But she still presumed upon her boarding-school education, and the high position of her pa as a builder, and the matrimonial offers she had had before she condescended to marry Thomas Dibble.

"Your husband, Mrs. Dibble, edged on by your taunts about your losses, and his own affection for you, has appropriated three hundred pounds."

"Appropriated," said Mrs. Dibble; "a fine word, thir, and one as I remember well to have written over and over again at boarding school, but I am not quite clear about the exact meaning of it."

"Prepare to hear the very worst news possible, Mrs. Dibble, and then I will tell you what it means."

"Don't, thir; O don't, thir!" said Mrs. Dibble. "I know now, I know; Thomas is a thief, I know. Yeth, yeth; I thee it all!"

"Don't agitate yourself," said the detective; "pray be calm. I have good news to come as well,—very good news."

But Mrs. Dibble would agitate herself; Mrs. Dibble would not be calm; Mrs. Dibble would insist upon moaning and crying and rocking herself to and fro, and bursting her hooks and eyes, and undoing her cap-strings and letting her curls come down. Mrs. Dibble was, indeed, most perverse.

"The money has been restored to its owner, and Dibble will, no doubt, get off with a month or two," said the detective.

"Get off with a month or two, thir; what do you mean? A month or two of what?"

"Imprisonment, of course," said Bales.

"O dear! O dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Dibble, the tears really coming into her eyes now, and her cap-strings too, blinding her with pink ribbon and "round saline globules," as that smart reporter friend of ours would say,—"What will become of me! I shall descend with grey hairs to the grave! and to think that I wath once at a boarding-school, the envy of them all, and the daughter of a gentleman, thir; yeth, a gentleman, though I thay it. O dear! O dear! Thomath, Thomath, what have you done!"

"I have told you what Thomas has done," said Bales, in his calm, imperturbable way; "and now I will tell you the good news I have for you, if you will only be quiet. The Right Honourable the Countess of Verner sends you this,—it is a

fifty-pound note; and she requests you to pack up your things and come down to Montem Castle with me."

Mrs. Dibble glanced at the note and listened to the detective's words, but continued to moan and cry. She did not know what else to do; for she was not quite sure that Bales was not deceiving her.

"The lady, it appears, was once in your house: she is Lieutenant Somerton's sister: if I told you that much, she said, you would understand."

"Lieutenant Thomerton! O yeth, yeth," said Mrs. Dibble, seizing the note; "I understand."

"It seems so," said Bales.

"She married a lord, O yeth. Me and Chrissy (poor lost dear!)—me and Chrissy went to see the wedding at Hanover Square, and grand it was to be sure, though I have heard my pa say that when he was married to my ma,—it is a good many yearth ago now,—that they walked on flowers and carpets for a quarter of a mile."

Then suddenly remembering that she had serious cause for grief, Mrs. Dibble put her apron to her eyes and began to cry afresh.

"Oh, you know all about it then; when will you be ready?"

"Thath hard to say. I shall have a great deal to do to get ready, and I thent a few things to the wash, which it hath not been my custom to do of late, and I am sure——"

"Can you be ready in an hour?" asked Bales, interrupting her.

"An hour! Abthurd: you mutht be mad to think of thutch a thing, thir. I wath thinking of a week at leatht before I could be ready to appear in noble society at a castle, though when I wath a girl——"

"Never mind when you were a girl, Mrs. Dibble, just think of your husband; he is in prison, and perhaps you can help him; Montem Castle is close to Brazencrook."

"O dear! what a hard-hearted man you mutht be to be thure, to remind me of that again just ath

I wath a trying to think that all your newth wath not bad newth."

And then Mrs. Dibble began to cry once more for decency's sake.

"Will you be ready in the morning?—however you must; so there's an end. Lady Verner wished that you would come to-day. You don't suppose you are going to sit in the drawing-room, and all that sort of thing, with an earl and countess, eh? You will be the housekeeper's visitor. Come, no more nonsense; say you will be ready in the morning."

"If it ith for the thake of my poor forlorn mithguided husband," said Mrs. Dibble, sighing, "I mutht, of course. I will, I will, thir."

"Then I shall call in a cab for you to-morrow morning at ten o'clock," said Bales, taking up his hat and leaving the poor little house without further ceremony. He was by no means in a good humour the next morning when he found Mrs. Dibble prepared with luggage enough to have made a voyage round the globe. Boxes, bundles,

parcels, carpet bags, umbrellas, shawls and mufflers, the old lady filled the cab inside and out, and she created quite a sensation at Paddington whilst Bales was taking tickets. She had lost an umbrella, and left a parcel in the cab; she had fallen over a luggage-truck, and quarrelled with a porter: so that when Bales came upon the platform, he found his companion the centre of interest and attraction, and the target for a series of lively jokes and witticisms from the "paper boys," who pressed the *Times*, *Standard*, and *Telegraph* upon her attention, much to her annoyance. She was telling an old gentleman who had come to her assistance, that she had had a boarding-school education, and that her father, who was a builder, had erected several stations and a railway bridge; and she did think that if there was civility to be got she ought to have it, let alone the fact of her losing money in the panic.

Mr. Bales, however, speedily induced Mrs. Dibble to take a seat in a first-class carriage, and the old gentleman smiled benevolently upon her. He

could easily see that it was not a dangerous case, he said to Mr. Bales. To what asylum was he conveying her?

"You had better ask her," said Bales. "You will be amused at her reply."

"Indeed!" said the gentleman.

"Yes," said Bales, "she rather likes to be asked the question."

"Then I will certainly put it," said the traveller, and he walked with Bales to the carriage.

The detective took his seat, and began to read the *Times* with great attention.

"Athylum, thir!" exclaimed Mrs. Dibble after a few moments, in reply to a bland question. "What do you mean, thir? How dare you, thir!"

"Really, madam, I did not intend to offend, but——"

"But—don't but me, thir!"

"No, certainly not," said the traveller, "certainly not; it was not my intention."

"Athylum indeed! If you are inquisitive, thir, let me tell you that my destination is Montem

Castle. Did you think I was mad, or a matron, thir."

"Oh, neither, neither; but a philanthropic lady who——"

"Rubbish! you think you are making game of me, but you can't do it, thir; and I am surprithed, —a man of your years."

"My years! what do you mean?"

"Yes, your years. Will her ladyship send a carriage for us, did you say?" Mrs. Dibble inquired of Bales, with the full intention of crushing her persecutor at once by the grandeur of her connections.

"Certainly," said Bales, with a bow of deference and a quiet wink at the stranger, who, at first inclined to be angry at Mrs. Dibble's remark about his age, now laughed heartily.

"Very good! Ha, ha, ha!" he exclaimed. "Very good. Her ladyship's carriage!"

The old gentleman's hilarity attracted quite a little crowd round the window, and Mrs. Dibble was excited into such a terrible rage, that she

flung her reticule at him and knocked his hat off, to the immense delight of the bystanders.

Bales roared with laughter, as Mrs. Dibble screamed and vociferated at the humorous gentleman upon whom she had turned the laugh so vigorously.

"Here, none of this,—none of this," said the guard, pitching the reticule back into the carriage and giving the signal for departure.

Screech went the whistle of the engine, and the train moved off amidst roars of laughter at the gentleman whose wig had fallen off with his hat. The passengers were looking out all along the train, and Mrs. Dibble suddenly seeing the humour of the whole thing, and the old man's difficulty with his false hair, began to laugh too; and Mr. Bales telling the story afterwards, said he certainly never laughed so much in his life.

Meanwhile the remains of Richard Tallant were being buried; buried in the same tomb where the father lay in that old church near Barton. Earl

Verner had desired that the obsequies might be performed with all decency and respect, seeing that whatever the dead man might have been, he was his wife's brother. So Lionel Hammerton and Arthur Phillips had attended with the Earl, and the body was buried with due solemnity.

What a termination to the ambition of Christopher Tallant! What an end to all that pride of wealth!—all those years of hard work, of toil and anxiety in the father's younger days; all those lessons of thrift, of energy, of industry, learnt in the north countrie; all that heaping up of riches: here was the final scene. Father and son lay together, the one a broken-hearted man, the other a bankrupt in purse and reputation, with a murderer's bullet in his brain!—the son of that London wife whom Christopher Tallant had taken down to Avonside in those days of his early manhood. Here they lay together—the proud dead father and his disinherited son: here they lay with their dead hopes, tenants of a dishonoured grave! They who should have been living in honour and high repute,

assisting to govern the destinies of a nation. A fine, generous, hospitable, manly fellow that proud merchant had been, hating anything and everything that was dishonourable in a monetary sense, yet gauging everything by a simple golden standard; he had carried his just anger at his son's misconduct into the grave, but there lay the son by his side, quiet enough now. It had been a subject of considerable discussion at Montem Castle before the funeral, whether Richard Tallant should be buried in the family vault, and Lord Verner had overruled all objections with his arguments in favour of this interment. He was the last male representative of the race, and it was not for them to carry further that awful retribution which had befallen him; and so, as we have said, the merchant's son was buried in the family vault.

Arthur Phillips remembered the other funeral; that gloomy cortége, which had arrested his steps on that misty autumn day, when, assured of the success of his picture, he had come down to Barton Hall to see Phœbe. It was Autumn again at this

second funeral, but the sun was shining brightly now, sending glints of coloured light from the oriel windows down the chancel of the old church, and glimmering upon the ceiling with a trembling reflection from the adjacent lake. The old church was full of people, not mourners, but lookers on: men and women come to see the murdered man's funeral, just as many of them would go to see the man hanged who had killed him, if they had an opportunity.

The old trees that had loomed forth dim and shadowy in the adjacent park, now stood forth in all their autumnal grandeur, and some of them cast long shadows in at the open doorway, upon the monumental pavements. The October wind moaned now and then round the old tower, and rustled the ivy, making it tap upon the windows in the midst of the parson's solemn funereal words. And now and then a few brown leaves came rushing into the chancel, as if they sought sanctuary against the persecutions of the wind. When the sexton crumbled the dust upon the coffin-lid,

these stray leaves shambled in also,—sad emblems of death and decay, but not without an eloquent suggestion to the thoughtful mind, of our reasonable faith in the resurrection of the dead; for autumn and winter are but the harbingers of spring. Arthur Phillips uttered a prayer that they whose sins brought their own punishment in this world, might thereby find forgiveness in the next for these same misdeeds.

Mrs. Phillips and the Countess sat together at Montem watching the leaves whirl hither and thither; those leaves,—so wild, so weird, so beautiful, so sad, so eloquent to Amy—they flew along the terrace like flocks of birds, away over the green turf, until they lighted on the distant lake, and sailed about wherever the wind willed. And Amy told her dear friend how the leaves had whirled round those carriage-wheels on that autumn day, when she first saw her husband. They always recalled that day, these autumn leaves—always brought it back to Amy's mind. These were her dead hopes, the leaves of her

young love that had been nipped by the frost of neglect. She had watered them with her tears, and then bade them go whither they listed.

Poor Amy! What a relief it was to open all her heart to Phœbe now, to repeat to her all those acts of deceit which she had practised. Mrs. Phillips shuddered at her friend's description of her interviews with Richard Tallant, and Amy painted her own miserable acts of dissembling in more sombre colours than they deserved. Yet all this had increased her gratitude to the Earl, who had believed in her despite everything, who had loved her from the beginning with the same earnest affection, who had never once doubted her, and whom she vowed again and again she would love at last.

Yet the dead leaves whirled about in the wind, and faint sounds of the minute-bell came wandering over the lake, like the knell of departed hopes and joys. Even Phœbe's soft sweet voice and tender words did not altogether neutralise the melancholy effect of these dead leaves and that

distant bell. But Amy felt that there was peace in this solemn autumn-time, nevertheless; and that all danger of losing Earl Verner's love was at an end. Remembering the peril through which she had passed, there was happiness in this; looking back for a moment to the black clouds which had hovered over Montem within the last few days, she could bear to look upon the dead leaves now without a pang, and with the soft, tender, soothing words of her dear, dear friend Phœbe nestling in her heart, there was peace and hope even in the murmurs of that funeral bell.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH SEVERAL PERSONS QUIT THE STAGE FOR EVER.

No great amount of persuasion was required to induce Lord Verner to give up his intention of prosecuting the superintendent of police at Brazencrook. The Watch Committee of the old borough had intimated to the officer that it would be necessary he should resign his situation, and he had done so. They were very obsequious to Lord Verner, and this was the most practical way of showing the town's allegiance to his lordship. But the chief contended, as fairly he might, that there were grounds of suspicion against Captain Hammerton, and that although he might have been hasty, he had not exceeded his duty in apprehending that gentleman. The subject was taken

up warmly by the local Press, and a smart London paper had a powerfully sarcastic and biting article calling the Brazencrook Watch Committee a set of snobs, and upholding the officer of police. On all hands, however, testimony was borne to the complete exculpation of Lionel Hammerton.

Seeing that the guilt of Shuffleton Gibbs was established most clearly in the first examination before the Brazencrook magistrates, it was certainly due to Lionel that he should be regarded as an injured man in that unfortunate apprehension by the Brazencrook chief. All his trouble and sorrow had arisen out of his own pride and want of confidence in the woman whom he professed to love. If he had been content to accept the warning of Paul Somerton that night in London, near the steps of the Ashford Club, what a world of misery he might have been spared; a manly faith in that high-spirited girl at Barton would have saved him. No one saw all this now more clearly than Lionel Hammerton, and what was more, he knew that he had been rightly punished. The only real bit

of consolation in the whole business was the prison episode. This was his only real grievance, the only bit of martyrdom in his career. If he could have felt that he had been injured by Amy; if the grievance had been on his side, he might have been more content. It is better to be wronged than to wrong; it is more comfortable to receive an injury than to commit an injustice. All Lionel Hammerton's troubles had been of his own creation, and family pride was at the bottom of them all. His incarceration was the only injury done to him which he had not courted, which his pride and injustice had not brought upon himself; but it was a source of gratification to him that Amy felt he had undergone this indignity on her account.

It was hard work to part from Amy; to leave the two girls whom he had known in those happy days at Barton Hall; to erase the past, and look forward into a future in which there were no familiar faces; but this was his penance, and he was willing now to abide by it. If that most

unkind suspicion of mercenary motives (which Lionel had not strength of mind enough to keep back in the personal explanations) set forth in a previous chapter, had not rankled in the mind of the Countess, the parting would have been no small trial on her part. She would not have given any outward sign of her feelings had her heart been breaking; but Lionel's unmanly suspicion had almost entirely removed the last fragment of her romantic love for him. Setting this aside, her honour as a wife, her gratitude towards Lord Verner, and a strong sense of duty (kept in constant excitement by Mrs. Arthur Phillips), would have saved her from any further exhibition of strong feeling. It is not in human nature to maintain a full control over the passions, and particularly over that love between man and woman which God has planted in the human heart for His own wise and beneficent purposes. When that great instinct of nature, which, secretly and unseen, draws two souls together, is set at nought, certain sorrow is the result. Happiness may come

in time to each of those who have broken this first instinctive contract of nature; but it is a very limited happiness compared with that perfect bliss which true lovers feel.

The Countess of Verner was as happy as a woman can be who had loved and lost, and married for revenge and ambition. Regard and respect ripened by degrees into what may be called sincere matrimonial friendship, and this was still further enhanced by the discovery of her old lover's unworthy suspicion about the sincerity of her love. She vowed to Mrs. Phillips, that had she been free to accept Lionel Hammerton, and he had sued at her feet with ten times the honeyed sweetness of his eloquence in the Barton gardens, the knowledge of his unworthy doubt of her true faith would have made her refuse him, had he been twenty times Lionel Hammerton and her first love.

So when they parted, Lionel Hammerton's brotherly kiss sent no thrill to Amy's heart, though she knew it was his intention never to return. Lord Verner shook his brother warmly by the hand,

begging him to come home as soon as he liked and as often. Mrs. Arthur Phillips kissed him for "Auld Lang Syne;" and her husband, the artist, exchanged a sympathetic glance with the friend of his early days, which deeply affected the voluntary exile. Mrs. Dibble, who was living in the housekeeper's room until Thomas should be released, begged to be allowed to shake hands with the Captain, and she told the servants afterwards that it did not need a boarding-school education to see that the Earl's brother was born nobility, and that you need not be a builder's daughter and copy specifications to know that Mr. Bales was a policeman in disguise, as he stood by all the time without the least emotion, for all the world as if a trial had just come to an end and the prisoner was going to be hanged, and he had the job of taking him back to gaol prior to the sentence being carried out.

Mr. Bales travelled as far as London with the Captain, and almost the first person he met, after seeing Lionel off, was Mr. Williamson, the barrister,

walking into the Temple. The two recognised each other immediately.

"Ah, Mr. Williamson, sir! how do you do? I thought you were lost," said the detective.

"No, not lost, Bales," said the barrister, extending his hand. "Come with me."

It was evening, and the detective followed his friend up the dark staircase.

When they reached the barrister's room, Williamson produced a latch key, and opened the door; the old woman who attended to this part of the chambers came blundering after them, full of exclamations of joy at seeing the barrister again.

"Light a fire," said the barrister.

"Lor, sir, the room is as damp as can be; it ain't fit to sit in after all these months; they wanted to break the door open, but I paid the rent regular out of the money you sent me, and I knowed, of course, as you would come back some day," said the woman.

"I never expected to do so, or only for a day, to settle my affairs here and give up the chambers

properly," said the barrister, addressing Bales, in reply to the woman.

"Lor, sir!" said the old woman, bustling about and lighting the fire and putting the table to rights.

"We can keep the damp out," said the barrister, "if there is any whisky left."

"O yes, sir, plenty!" said the woman.

"Very well," said the barrister, producing his cigar case, and in a very short time Mr. Bales sat listening to those portions of Mr. Williamson's story with which he was not already acquainted.

The barrister's manner was far more quiet and subdued than it was when we first made his acquaintance. All that cynicism and apparent infidelity had dropped bodily as it were out of his conversation. He was evidently quietly resigned to his lot, calmly resolved to live out the end of his days uncomplainingly. He had succeeded to a certain extent in his somewhat romantic and almost hopeless resolves to reform his miserable daughter. He did not tell Bales how and by what degrees he had worked upon her darkened

mind; he said nothing of the days of patient and unflagging effort to instruct her, to excite her higher sensibilities, to animate her with a true love for the beautiful and sublime, and through the medium of nature and art to bring her to a knowledge of the divine blessings of the Christian faith and hope. It was a plain unvarnished story which the barrister told his friend the detective. Whatever may have been the result of the father's endeavour to change the perverted nature of his singularly-discovered child, her career was at an end—she died of a fever in a French convent, where the barrister had placed her, by her own desire; and Mr. Williamson had left France only the day before the detective met him after the burial of his daughter, upon whose tomb he had inscribed those words of the second commandment, which he had written down in that memorable epistle to Paul Somerton.

The detective told Williamson all about the stirring occurrences which had taken place during his absence, and the barrister resolved that he

would convert what stock and property he had into money, and join Lieutenant Somerton in the Cape, at any rate for a time.

"I shall travel about the world and occupy myself with the manners and customs of other lands," said the barrister, "and write sketches of travel for some of my publishing friends in town. If I could put my own trials into a book, and make capital out of my own troubles, I might perpetrate a novel, Bales."

"It would be very taking," said Bales; "I have been asked, sir, by a gentleman that writes for the *Pyrotechnic*, to let him do my auto-biography, with all the cases I have been mixed up in; but I don't think I shall."

They chatted together for some hours in the familiar room, and we leave them enveloped in clouds of smoke through which the candles burn as dimly as the barrister's future hopes; we leave them to carry our readers to the Brazencrook county gaol, where there are three prisoners in whom we have an interest.

Shuffleton Gibbs had been examined before the magistrates, and committed for trial on the clearest evidence, as we have intimated; so that the prediction of the showman, that he would not leave his bed again, was not fully verified: only a very few weeks elapsed, however, before the criminal gradually sank, and at last died as much from want of gin as through disease. He died a miserable death, uninfluenced altogether by the ministrations of the chaplain who, by a strange coincidence, had been a member of that very college where Gibbs and Richard Tallant had first become acquainted; but before he died, when he felt quite satisfied that he was in no danger of being hung, he admitted the truth of the showman's evidence, and not only confessed his own guilt, but boasted of it, gloated over it, and described the murder in fearfully graphic terms, until the prison officials sickened at the details, and shrunk back from the awful skeleton-like figure that grinned and raved in those last death agonies.

Confronted with the chief witness against him,

Gibbs put out his skinny hand, which the showman took timidly in his, and with that professional feeling which never deserted the owner of the famous dog Momus, Digby Martin, *alias* Smith, thought to himself what a rival Gibbs would have been just then to that living skeleton, who had treated him so shamefully at Severntown!

It is neither necessary nor desirable that we should dwell upon this wretched scene in the prison, where the last of the race to which Gibbs belonged ended his miserable career. Let it suffice that he died and was buried; and that the showman was released, and afterwards brought quite a small fortune to the proprietor of the tavern near the Brazencrook Music Hall, by relating the true particulars of the murder in the ruined castle of Montem, exhibiting the clothes of the murderer, and the pistol with which the deed was done. Momus took her share in these performances, and afterwards went round with the hat, —being faithful to her rough master to the last, and never wearying in her obedience to his behests.

Thomas Dibble was found guilty; but in consideration of the excellent character which he received from several witnesses, and the whole of the circumstances under which the robbery was committed, he was only sentenced to three months' imprisonment. During the whole of this time, Mrs. Dibble remained at Montem Castle with the housekeeper, except when she went, once a month, to see Thomas, for a few minutes, at the gaol, upon which occasions she made a show of forgiveness and sympathy; but she could never resist telling the turnkey, in Dibble's presence, of her boarding-school education, the proposals of marriage which she had received when she lived at home with her pa, and other biographical reminiscences with which the reader is already too familiar.

When Thomas was released he was conducted from the gaol by an agent of Lord Verner to a comfortable cottage near Avonworth, a few miles from Barton Hall, in which cottage Mrs. Dibble was already living. She would have met her

husband at the end of his confinement; but Lady Verner had made the arrangements of the time, and the agent carried them out. When he had driven Dibble to the cottage he told him that this was his future home, and that he would receive from Lady Verner, a quarterly allowance sufficient to enable his wife and himself to live comfortably all their days. Poor Dibble's surprise and gratitude knew no bounds; he cried and laughed by turns; and he was quite content to believe ever afterwards what Mrs. Dibble told him, that all this had been done because of her boarding-school education, and on account of her pa being a gentleman. With all this good fortune following so soon upon a series of miseries, and coming to him at the gloomiest period of his career, Thomas Dibble's spirits soon rose to a high pitch of buoyancy; whilst "comfortable living" and plenty to eat and drink gave him courage to withstand the renewal of his wife's domineering influence. He never succeeded in being master, and he would not have drunk of the well of St.

Keyne if he could; for Dibble's was a humble spirit; he had always served, and was content to do so;—in fact, he rather preferred it than otherwise. But once in these latter days he asserted his dignity in such a way that prevented Mrs. Dibble from drawing the rein too tightly, and enabled them to live more happily than ever they had lived before.

"Never you mention that roll of notes business again, Maria; it baint that I wishes to deny that I was not an honest man, but I thinks on it often enough myself, without your dinning it into my ears. I'se never said I had a boarding-school education, an' all that, Maria, and I knows you has; but when a man's shown a woman that he would do anything in the world for her, even to putting his hand to thieve, it baint for that woman to throw it in his face. Don't do it again, Maria, or I goes out of this house never to come back no more."

Mrs. Dibble did not mention the subject again, and they lived all the more happily together after

this assertion of his position by Dibble. But the builder's daughter, with her peculiar intermittent lisp, did not fail, whenever an opportunity arose, to proclaim her birth, parentage, and education to the inhabitants of the district. In course of time, by dint of household economy, Mrs. Dibble bought an old square piano at Avonworth, and she would sit as she did in the old times of Still Street on Sunday evenings, and thump out the "Old Hundredth" until her hooks and eyes came undone, and Dibble had a fine prospect of back and back hair which reminded him of those prosperous days when he was porter at the famous offices of the Meter Iron Works Company. This, however, excited feelings of regret in poor Dibble's mind that he was dependent upon the bounty of Lady Verner now, instead of earning his own living; so he made application to the agent for "something to do;" and, pleased with Dibble's desire to make some practical return for the kindness he received, Lady Verner recommended him to Mr. Arthur Phillips, who gave him

another cottage near Barton, and had him instructed in the mystery of grinding colours. Dibble soon made himself useful, and found enough to do at Barton Hall (where he had once been in the employ of Christopher Tallant, Esq.) all day long. This made his evenings happier; the music of the old piano no longer twitted him with his dependency. Mrs. Dibble, as had been her wont in the happy times, mixed every night for him a glass of gin toddy, and whilst they sat together by the fire on the conclusion of the "Old Hundredth," she acknowledged that after all Thomas Dibble was worthy to be the husband of a woman who had had a boarding-school education, with music and extras.

CHAPTER XX.

CLOSING SCENES.

The bells of Brazencrook and Avonworth which rung out so merrily at Amy's marriage, and tolled so solemnly at the burial of Richard Tallant, have rung out joyously in celebration of the birth of an heir to the noble house of Verner, and with that event we approach the concluding scenes of this drama of love and money, of Fortune and Finance.

You will not sit patiently wondering what the end is to be, like you sat when that new drama was produced at the London theatre, where all the mystery and grandeur of the play was concentrated in the last act. Already you have guessed how things will end; for we have not striven to be mysterious, neither have we desired to trifle with your feelings.

Our chief aim has been to take you into our confidence, to make you our friend, to let you know, without circumlocution, as much about the people whose lives we are sketching as we knew at starting. You may have been a little surprised, perhaps, and slightly confused at that incident of the two girls at Barton Hall; but otherwise we have not laboured to hide our knowledge for a time, that we might surprise you further on. This may be a fault (one of many faults) in our narration of the history of these actors in the romance of the Tallants of Barton. If it be so, we hope that the motive which lies at the foundation of it may in some wise be considered a laudable one.

Although we shall not surprise you like the dramatists with these closing scenes, we have brought our chief characters together for the finish. If you do not see them all before the foot-lights, you will hear of them. We cannot let down the drop-scene amidst a crash of music and blue fire; but we promise you there shall be real water in these closing scenes, real trees and

meadows, real halls and castles, real streets, and above all, real people.

If we succeed in impressing you with this fact, we shall gladly dispense with the blue fire and the orchestral accompaniments. Our fire shall be the glorious sun; our music the roar of the great city, and the murmur of the wind in the Severnshire valley.

Nearly a year has elapsed since the Brazencrook bells proclaimed the Countess of Verner a mother; two years have gone by since Lionel Hammerton sailed for India; and once more it is summer time o'er all the land,—hot, glowing, glorious summer,—and we propose to let down the drop-scene amidst the refulgent splendours of the time.

Shining with the same genial warmth upon all men and things, Great Sol is your only constitutional monarch. Yon magnificent sun,—nothing influences his benign influence. The courtier wins no smile from him that the beggar may not have. None enjoy a monopoly of his favour. He rules

over all with an equal sway. Eloquence, money, claims of long descent, deeds of arms, gorgeous array, elicit no extra honours at his court. See how benignantly he looks down upon yon little cottage. See how his beams light up those lichen-covered bricks, and tremble upon those little square panes of glass. See how yon beggar lies in the royal presence, basking in the genial warmth. That fine mansion close by has no grander lights upon it; that proud lord in his carriage gets no more sunshine than the beggar.

O glorious freedom of nature! Why do we not learn the lessons thou teachest? Why does that proud woman take up her dress lest her ragged sister should contaminate her, when yon glorious sun takes both in his radiant arms in acknowledged equality? Look at those streams of sunny light that fall upon the gorgeous equipages in Hyde Park; they do not disdain those ragged children on the footpath.

It is the height of the London season, and all the great town is filled with the pomp and glitter of high

life. Everything looks bright, even poverty has a smile. The beggar is in clover, and the wretched are at least warm. There are no snowstorms, no cold cutting winds to torture the body and make cheerless hearths still more dismal. London wears her fairest smiles; the sun with one broad depth of light clasps the great world in a fond embrace. The great town is a whirl of life. Royalty, nobility, commonalty, roll along the glowing thoroughfares in glitter of gold and silver. The Thames is alive with pleasure-boats, and the steamers go skimming along past the Houses of Parliament, where the business of the nation is going on despite those everlasting reform debates, and that continual stream of talk which flows from lip to pencil, from short-hand notes to type, and stares us in the face every morning in long columns of print that are never read from beginning to end, except by those professional readers who corrected them in the garish glare of the gas when we were all abed. It is the gay time of the year entirely, for the rich more par-

ticularly, for beauty, for the young commencing their first season; it is the gay time of the year for those dashing gentlemen on prancing horses, for those blooming ladies in the open carriages; those loungers in the parks; for artists whose pictures are marked "sold" in the Exhibitions; for opera and theatrical people in the full tide of success; for West-End tradesmen and hotel-keepers; for strolling musicians; for everybody in fact; the hot, gay, bustling, brilliant London season.

There was a time, at this period of the year, when Richard Tallant rode about amongst the best of those gallants at Tattenham Corner; and when Mr. Gibbs wore the lightest of light gloves and the tightest of fancy boots that you would see in all the park. Christopher Tallant too, in his cut-away coat and checked trousers,—he had stood by those railings, in the sunshine, to see his fine son pass by. The Right Hon. Lionel Hammerton had many a time and oft been in the midst of that glittering stream of humanity.

Surely all this pomp and pageantry cometh not so soon again after that financial earthquake which swallowed up so many heaps of gold and houses and horses and carriages! Does anything ever make any change in that magnificent show of national wealth in the London season? Do all those railways over the house-tops and under the houses, spanning streets, and burrowing beneath the cellars—do they make any difference to those everlasting rows of cabs and 'busses and carts and carriages, and the blocks in Fleet Street and Ludgate Hill? Does anything ever alter the social aspect of London, the busy, bustling, gorgeous, golden, seething aspect of the streets?

Despite the commercial storm, in face of all those wonderful contrivances of bridge and rail to ease the traffic, London was as full of life and gaiety and pomp and glitter and show, this third London season of the Countess of Verner, as ever it had been before. We shall leave her ladyship in the midst of the whirl of pomp and pleasure, one of the

queens of beauty. She has been kissed by our gracious Queen; she has excited the envy of many a titled dame. She has had many an admiring eye upon her amongst crowds of smiling courtiers. She has reached the highest point of her ambition, and in the foremost rank of the first society in Europe; her husband has made a great speech in the House of Lords; she is still declared to be the most beautiful woman of this gorgeous London season. Their West-End house is filled with all the leading people of the time; the Verners are the rage,—the Countess is the one bright particular star in the aristocratic atmosphere of the period. And here we leave her looking her best; heightened are all those charms which once attracted Lionel Hammerton, and will live in his memory, like the sound of falling water to the traveller who has sunk down maimed and athirst, unable to taste the cooling stream which goes rippling and smiling on, and chattering over the rocks as if it mocked him. We leave Lord Verner, supremely happy in his married life, blissfully ignorant of the

narrow escape which that happiness has had of shipwreck; blissfully ignorant, like the mariner, of the shoals and quicksands which have endangered his vessel in the fog and darkness. We leave our Countess in the full light of fashion's splendours, and still bent on the performance of her duty in the high station to which she has been exalted. If we were writing a mere book of fiction, and not a true story of life, Lord Verner would probably have died conveniently towards the end of the story, that Lionel Hammerton might, in defiance of law and order and everything else, have married his widow, the twain ending their days by some lake of Como, where the perfumed light steals through the mist of alabaster lamps, and the law is not too stringent anent matrimonial license; but, as this is a matter-of-fact history, Lord Verner does not die for the purpose of rewarding his brother's stupidity with a wife and a title. Nay, more, that title has slipped away from Lionel Hammerton for ever.

We leave the Countess of Verner amidst the splendid pleasures of the London season, and,

with the hope that an occasional expression of weariness which shadows those brilliant eyes may indicate a surfeit of pleasure, rather than any lack of real happiness, we turn to that great flat country of Lincolnshire with its green fields of wheat, its long dreamy-looking river, and its rich pastures. We stop at Oldhall Farm, and there, with the windows wide open, we find Luke Somerton telling some neighbours, who have come in to tea, all about that model farm in Severnshire. He never wearies of talking about those wonderful cow-sheds and stables and granaries, and the new yard that is hemmed in with buildings such as those which he is erecting at Oldhall. Mrs. Somerton, with a watchful look in her eyes, sits by plying her needle, and now and then a telling proverb falls from her lips. She has not quite got over that sarcastic disappointed manner which characterised her conversation years ago, but she is quieter now and more subdued; any one can see that she has had her troubles, but she is not an unhappy woman nevertheless. Some people would call her a very

happy woman; but these knew nothing of that confession made to the master of Barton Hall in those past days of her life in the Vale of Avonworth; otherwise they would have seen cause to rejoice over certain occasional letters from Paul Somerton, and sundry sweet little notes from Mrs. Arthur Phillips, which cheered the latter days of the ambitious Lincolnshire woman.

The letters of Paul Somerton reveal many circumstances of interest to the readers of these pages. We gather from them, and the batch of Cape newspapers which accompanies each epistle, that the Lieutenant soon ceased to nourish his unholy attachment for the siren who, for a time, had held him in adamantine chains. There are fevers of passion which in the young heart soon burn out and leave nothing behind but a vague and harmless memory, without one pang of sorrow or regret. Happily for Paul Somerton, his wild and wretched passion for that poor abandoned dupe of Shuffleton Gibbs partook of this fiery yet transient character. When his better

nature had time to assert itself, and the temptress was no longer in his sight, her image gradually faded out, to be replaced by one worthy in every way to be treasured in the heart of an honest and honourable man.

Going out to the Cape, Lieutenant Somerton made the acquaintance of the daughter of a brother officer, a charming girl of his own age; acquaintanceship rapidly grew into love, and a month after the vessel's arrival in Table Bay, they were married. Paul wrote home very romantic letters about his wife, her beauty, her accomplishments, the bravery of her father, with sundry domestic details of regimental life at the Cape, which were highly gratifying to his father and mother. The latter said to herself that, after all, the Somertons were people of importance in the world. Thoughts of the boy who had gone away in early life and never returned, thoughts of the poor unburied body tossed about beneath the deep waters, intervened, to throw a shadow upon these happy feelings concerning her soldier-son; and that con-

fession started up to mar the happy associations which now clung about the Avonworth region of Barton; but, on the whole, Sarah Somerton was in a certain sense a happy woman, and Luke would lash himself into ecstasies over the letters of Phœbe and Paul.

Lieutenant Somerton had not been married many months when his old friend Mr. Williamson called upon him, and was pleased to find him married. The Barrister did not stay long at the Cape, but long enough to tell Paul the conclusion of the story which he had partly related in that big letter which struck Paul down with such severity in those dark days of his boyish passion. Williamson derived great satisfaction and comfort from Paul's marriage, and Paul parted from his old friend with tears of gratitude. Williamson had determined to go into the interior of Africa with a band of adventurous explorers, and the last that Paul had heard of him was from some natives, who had gone out part of the way and returned with satisfactory news of the progress

of the expedition. After the first year of Paul's marriage some English troops arrived in the colony from India, one company being in the command of the Hon. Captain Hammerton, who had at once sought out Paul, and they speedily became bosom friends.

"We often talk," said Paul in his last letter, "of Avonworth Valley, Barton Hall, and the farm. My dear little wife says she gets quite jealous of Barton Hall, and Phœbe and Amy (we never call her Countess, I and Hammerton) and I do hope that some day I shall bring her over to England to see you all. She is most delighted with my description of Oldhall and the Lincolnshire country, for she was born close by, in the north of Nottinghamshire, bless her dear little face!

"Captain Hammerton and myself once had a disagreement, which you know something about. In the most noble way he apologised to me, and expressed his regret for any annoyance he may have caused me, and said it had been a load on his mind for a long time. He is a very agreeable companion, but

rather gloomy and despondent at times. I often think that he and our Amy that used to be were rather smitten with each other, and that he grieves about having lost her. My wife says it is easy to see that he has been crossed in love. If being careless and generous; sometimes in very high spirits and at others equally low; continually with a cigar in his mouth, and sitting dreamily looking at the smoke; talking regretfully about England, and saying he shall never see it any more; sometimes visiting us continually, and then keeping away altogether, as it were: if these are tokens of his being crossed in love, as my wife calls it, then she is right no doubt. The other day he had a brush with some Kaffir raiders, and fought like a lion. He went after them with only some twenty men: they encountered a hundred, killed a dozen, and brought in twenty prisoners. They say the Captain fought like a very devil, and he talks of the business as if he liked it. He says he should not mind if war broke out to-morrow; he would like to have a year of exciting work. My wife

says this is a further sign that he has been crossed in love.

"For my own part, I hope things will go on peaceably. I think they will. There is a more settled feeling here than there was. I am not a coward, I hope; but war for its own sake is not to my liking, and the chances are that, if all goes on comfortably for another year, I shall be with you for a month or two, with my dear Katy, in your flat but fertile county.

"I am glad to hear such good news from Mr. Phillips, and it is just as it should be that Phœbe and her husband should be living at Barton Hall: I should like to see that well-known district once again, and sincerely hope to do so before another year is at an end."

It is summer, we said, o'er all the land, and these are summer scenes, these closing scenes of ours. The winter of fickle Fortune has been with us in many of these pages. Our story has had more to do with storm than sunshine; this closing scene is

the greenest and sunniest spot in our journey. We stand where we did at the opening of our story, within the shadow of Berne Hills. You know that modern mansion in the smiling vale of Avonworth, with its long gravelly drive, its half a mile of velvety lawn, its splendid park; its groups of cedars, birch trees, ash and sycamore; its ornamental lake, and those glorious bits of distant hill and dale in the ever-changing lights of this western land. Here, where we first saw that sweet, fair, *spirituel* face, with the parted lips and the flowing hair; here, where we took you, dear reader, by the button-hole, to direct your attention to all that was picturesque and lovely in the hills and the valleys; here, where we introduced you to the leading people in our story; here, where we paused to mourn over that fine old merchant, dead of his golden sorrow; here, where we saw those love-passages between Lionel and Amy, and where we have sat beside the artist whilst he has limned those wood-side bits of beauty, heightened by his dreams of love; here, in this glorious summer-time, with all the familiar

associations of the place upon us: here we call upon the prompter to whistle down that sombre-coloured scene and bring this poor drama to an end.

In the room above the portico, looking down the drive and commanding the full range of those Berne Hills, we find Arthur Phillips in his new studio. Far different to that work-a-day room in the cathedral close, wealth has stepped in here to make art luxurious. This studio is a painting-room, drawing-room, library, all in one, as if the whole house had been ransacked for contributions to the master's pet room. Cabinets, couches, statues, vases, rich curtains, a piano, curious clocks, mirrors, books in elaborate bindings, great portfolios, and a host of things that might in imagination have graced the room of some grand old Venetian painter of the classic days. From one corner, these many treasures are excluded by means of curtains of a neutral tint, which shut in a space where the artist works with whatever light he pleases, with the Berne Hills before him, or with

nothing but the light of day upon his canvas—so perfect and unique are his arrangements.

Here we leave our artist at work finishing a picture which he is painting, with a loving fidelity, worthy of the subject. A beautiful woman like that vignette which we saw in the College Green (when Arthur Phillips discovered that he had not a rival in Lionel Hammerton) is sitting beside a cradle where a baby lies fast asleep, with one of its little round arms outside the lace coverlet. By the mother's knee is a curly-headed boy, making his first acquaintance with picture-books. This study from life represents the artist's wife and children.

Whilst he is putting in the finishing touches to the accessories Mrs. Phillips is playing a rippling, dreamy sonata on the piano close by.

In at the open window comes the warm breath of the summer wind laden with rare perfumes, the music of birds, the faint tinkle of sheep-bells, and full of suggestive whisperings about the summer fields of rustling corn, and the

newly gathered hay, the wild flowers in the green and sunny lanes, the clear rippling brooks that glide by luxurious hedge-rows, and all the multifarious rural beauties that are known to summer winds.

Free from all the ordinary cares of the world, with faculties cultivated and imagination influenced and softened by the loving study of art, blessed in the love of the one woman who had been the dream of his life, as husband and father, Arthur Phillips had realised far more than all his dearest hopes.

And Phœbe,—that frank, confiding girl who had loved him all along, and told him so when he had been courageous enough to ask the question, —her life was as near an approach to the perfect happiness of which we spoke in some preceding pages as it is possible for mortal existence to be.

Arthur had realised to the full that touchingly simple saying of Anderson's, that "people had a great deal of trouble to go through, and then they became famous."

The only shadows which fell upon the green-sward of their path in life's highway were those which fell from the memory of others' sorrows; but, like the shadows of summer clouds upon the green and flowery landscape, these only made the way more beautiful, and heightened still further the glory of that halo of gratitude which shone about their peaceful lives.

THE END.

BRADBURY, EVANS, AND CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 046431455